

**The Internet Guide to
Chinese Wire-Fu and Fantasy
(1987 – 2000)**

**Compiled by
Blake Dennis Matthews**

This work is a compilation of reviews of fantasy and wire-fu films hailing from Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the People's Republic of China, produced between 1987 (the year *A Chinese Ghost Story* came out) and 2000 (the year *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* became a huge international success). It was not made with the intention of making a profit, but as a personal database of film reviews in the classic "Leonard Maltin style" and as a means to preserve the writings of many internet fansites and fanpages that have since stopped updating for one reason or another.

The other half of the reviews have been taken from different websites, some of which have been taken down, others of which are no longer updated, and a handful of which are still active. These include (but are not limited to):

- Wasted Life
- Teleport City
- View from the Brooklyn Bridge
- Kung Fu Cinema
- Stomp Tokyo
- Hong Kong Movie Database
- Internet Movie Database
- City on Fire
- The Spinning Image
- Hong Kong Film Net
- So Good Reviews
- Cold Fusion Video
- A Beautiful Film Worth Fighting For
- Far East Films

Most of the reviews have been reformatted to fit a specific template. As the reviews have been drawn from diverse sources, the lengths, quantity of spoilers, and information about the films may differ from one movie to another. Some favorites may have an entry lasting only a single paragraph, while other more obscure movies may have a review lasting two pages or more.

It should also be noted that not all opinions stated in the selected reviews will reflect the opinions of the other contributors and reviewers in this work.

To all of those who tuned into TNT on a Saturday night in the fall of 1997 for a night of Michelle Yeoh (or Khan) in the form of *The Heroic Trio*, its sequel, and *Wing Chun*, thus having their first exposure to wire-fu.

- Blake Matthews

All Men Are Brothers – Blood of the Leopard (Hong Kong, 1993: Chan Wu-NGai) - Lin Chung, a duty-bound military officer during the Ching Dynasty befriends a fierce warrior monk named Ru Chi-shen who shares his love of martial arts. Chung is double-crossed by his rival and wrongly accused of plotting an assassination of the local governor. Saved by his friend Chi-sen, Chung is reluctant to turn against the government that spurned him until he learns of his wife's death at the hands of his rival. The dismissed military commander spurns the aid of the deadly spade-wielding monk to face his enemies alone. Chi-sen the monk must choose between saving face or helping his friend.

This movie is based on a Shaw Brothers film called *Pursuit*, made in 1972. This in turn was based upon a classic Chinese story called *All Men Are Brothers*. The story deals with the popular theme of the rebellion against the Ching Dynasty run by the Manchu's who were unpopular with the Chinese people. The film captures the frustration and confusion that officials might have felt upon being told to turn on their fellow countrymen.

1993 was a big year for kung fu films in Hong Kong and this one rates below some of the top picks such as *Iron Monkey* and *Fong Sai Yuk*. All these films share fanciful wirework and gravity-defying leaps but *All Men Are Brothers* doesn't pull it off with the same style. The story is engaging but uneven as too much of the film is spent building up to the final showdown which seems rushed. Elvis Tsui is clearly the star of the film with the best role I've seen yet in a modern kung fu film. He plays it loud, intense, outspoken, and simply oozes charisma onscreen. The rest of the characters seem wooden by comparison.

The transfer is a disappointment as the fixed white subtitles are frequently hard to read. The sound and video are standard or below and the extras are weak. The synopsis and cast information are simply the same as provided on the jacket. Why do distributors even bother? Two trailers feature some romantic comedies?!

All Men Are Brothers doesn't have the best choreography or originality of story. What remains though is a fun, energetic film about loyalty and friendship that just manages to reach its nose above the silt of mediocrity. (by Mark Pollard of Kung Fu Cinema)

Ashes of Time (Hong Kong, 1994: Wong Kar-Wai) - I think without a doubt that this is one of the most beautifully photographed films ever made. Every frame seems to have been painstakingly thought out with a painter's perspective. The stand-alone images from this film are unforgettable. The colors, textures, rich hues, use of light and shadow and striking portraits are almost overwhelming; like a wave washing over you. But what a difficult film to get your arms around or your mind either.

Wong Kar-Wai has created a film that is structured in such an elliptical way that it needs more than one viewing to understand the plot and the characters. The first time I watched this film I nearly shut it off after twenty minutes because I felt so confused and so disconnected with what was happening on the screen. Then slowly it pulled me in and I found it fascinating and powerful. The tone of sadness and dislocation that permeate the film seeps into your bones like an autumn chill. In some ways the film could be accused of catching a case of self importance in its heavy philosophical tone, use of inner narrative and the near fetish for beauty, but it creates such a multi-textured tapestry of images and music that I don't care.

Lest I forget, this is a sword-fighting movie. At least on the surface.

Leslie Cheung as Ouyang Feng exiles himself to the desert where he sets up shop as an agent for swordsmen for hire. This self-imposed exile is because his lover, Maggie Cheung, has tired of waiting for him and married his older brother. The film revolves around characters that come to him for one reason or another and the film follows them in vignette fashion for a while until they disappear from the story. Like the desert though all traces of them disappear with the wind.

The first story involves Murong who asks him to kill Huang Yaoshi (Tony Leung Kar Fai) Ouyang's oldest friend because he stood up his sister. Then the sister comes and asks Ouyang to kill her brother because he will not give her the freedom she needs. It is the same person – Yin and Yang - played with great presence by whom else but Brigitte Lin.

In the second story Tony Leung Chiu-Wai comes looking for work as a hired killer. He is going blind and needs to earn money so that he can go home to see the "peach blossoms" before he loses all his sight. The fight between him and his targets is an amazing piece of work.

The action scenes were put together by Sammo, but Wong Kar-Wai utilizes a method of quick cutting and blurring the picture to create a startling canvass of images. In most films where this has been copied and used, I have found it very annoying, but here it captures the mood of the film perfectly.

In the last episode, another young killer, Jackie Cheung, shows up looking for work. To show that he still has some humanity left inside he accepts a killing job for one egg from Charlie Yeung.

Finally, in the last few minutes of the film – the scene shifts to Maggie talking to Huang Yaoshi and telling him in a monologue of her undying love for Ouyang. The camera stays on her face in close-up for about two minutes and it is perhaps two of the most ravishing minutes in film history. Her beauty and sadness punch a hole in your stomach.

I can easily understand many people not liking this film at all. It's obsession with artistic angles and images could easily grate along with a slow-moving obscure plot, but I think it is a film that everyone should explore with open eyes and an open mind. It is a film experience. (by Brian of View from the Brooklyn Bridge)

The Assassin (Hong Kong, 1993: Billy Chung) - *The Assassin* is a stylish and bloody film featuring some terrific actors, including Zhang Feng-yi (*Farewell My Concubine*) and Rosamund Kwan in an ambitious yet dizzying story that may leave viewers frustrated at first glance.

Tong Po Ka is separated from Yiu, his lover and thrown into prison. After being tortured, Tong is pitted against his fellow prisoners in a life and death contest to select a new assassin for the kingdom. Having survived, he is renamed "Tong Chop" and enters the service of the kingdom's sadistic ruler. After a series of successful assassinations alongside Wong Kau, his new friend and fellow assassin, Tong fails a mission when he finds himself unable to kill a child. Wong, his ambitious friend finishes the job while Tong retreats into the mountains to escape his grim occupation. Tong happens upon his Yiu, who has remarried and begins a new life with her family and neighbors until he is found by his fellow assassins. Tong must face Wong, who has taken his place as top assassin and confront the kingdom's ruler.

This colorful film sports impressive outdoor imagery, menacing sets, and fanciful fights that could have come from [Ronny Yu's] masterpiece, *The Bride with White Hair*. The film also

earned a category III rating for containing absolutely fiendish graphic violence where huge swords cleave limbs and vicious metal claws tear apart unsuspecting victims. The rapid pace of editing seen throughout the film (more on that later), greatly enhances the first scene where we see Tong engage in his first assignment with his cohorts. As the objectives and assigned positions are described to the assassins, the camera quickly pans through the narrow street, showing each assassin waiting in his hiding spot. Incredibly, one assassin even waits submerged in a nearby body of water covered with ice. Once the battle erupts, the camera deftly slides left down one side of the street, scrolling through the carnage.

While the choreography is pure fantasy, the story's grim tone and the leading actors' somber performances keep the film from leaping completely past the realm of reality. Zhang Feng-yi plays the lead with no emotion and appears appropriately weary at times. His martial counterpart is Wong, played by Max Mok who is less convincing in his role as a ruthless killer. Rosamund Kwan's character, Yiu gets less screen time than she should have considering the character's relationship to Tong.

What the actors cannot help is the story's manic pace and abrupt editing. While modern action films from Hong Kong are well known for their visually high-octane editing, *The Assassin* appears to have taken that style to heart with the story's pacing as well. Most scenes appear hurried and the story, which must have taken place over a couple of years is presented in a "Foot Notes" fashion as if the filmmakers were either pressured to keep the film short or significant cuts took place in post-production.

Its unfortunate that the film's story which has potential is marred by poor editing. The actors have little else to do but try and keep up. Against other swordplay films such as *The Blade* and Wong Kar Wai's *Ashes of Time*, that both mixed grim realism with stylish editing, *The Assassin* marginally holds its own thanks to the raw intensity of its violence and snatches of inspired cinematography. (by Mark Pollard of Kung Fu Cinema)

Bare-Footed Kid (Hong Kong, 1993: Johnnie To) - Maggie Cheung owns a fabric manufacturing business inherited down through her family, who has a secret ingredient used to make their dye. Ti Lung works for her, but in actuality he is a former rebel general in hiding. Aaron Kwok is a country bumpkin who comes to town seeking out TL, who was his father's best friend. As serendipity would have it, AK is also illiterate but bumps into Jacklyn Wu, a young lady who teaches kids how to read and write. A rival fabric company wants Maggie Cheung's business, and if they can't have that, they want her secret for making dye. And they'll resort to any unscrupulous means to get it.

The movie has a good ensemble cast. There's no hokey comedy but there are some funny and endearing moments. The characters of Maggie Cheung and Ti Lung share an unrequited love, and the actors have great chemistry so that you as the viewer really pull for them. The romance aspect between Aaron Kwok and Jacklyn Wu, who eerily favors Anita Mui in appearance, is well done, too.

The action is fairly good. There are so wire-assisted moves here and there, and sometimes the undercranking is a tad fast, but for the most part the fighting is very grounded. Ti Lung has a few fight scenes, and he looks really good, even sporting a pair of butterfly swords in one battle. Aaron Kwok performs his fight choreography very well. He's good with his feet, and [Lau Kar-Leung] strings together some nice combos for him to perform. There's plenty of action and it's well paced, but there is no real foe to challenge Aaron Kwok to make for a good finale, so you have to content yourself with him wading through quite a few henchmen to take

out the rival boss. All in all, it was an enjoyable 90 mins. of solid MA action with a decent plot and fine acting performances. (by Scott Blasingame)

Beheaded 1000, The (Hong Kong, 1993: Ting Shan-Hsi) - Owing more to silent-era serial films of fantasy from China than Hong Kong's early '90s New Wave, *The Beheaded 1000* is a lumbering epic overburdened by a mix of genres, outdated visual effects, and intolerable melodrama. Overlong and mediocre in every way, the film is only notable for having one-time superstar Jimmy Wang Yu's last starring role and Joey Wong's last action role.

The Beheaded 1000 is basically a live-action comic book that gets progressively outrageous and inexplicable in action and story. Its major flaw is having a convoluted plot that rambles on aimlessly while frequently stumbling around amid massive holes. On one level it deals with the passing of old, regretful heroes and tortured villains forced to contend with their karma, but on the other it devolves into a comic book style, supernatural battle that has the wind plucked from its sails just as it climaxes.

Jimmy Wang Yu plays Ren De-tie, the region's top executioner who has successfully beheaded nearly 1000 convicted criminals including notoriously vicious members of the Blood Brothers gang. Despite their fierceness and martial arts skills these villains with names like Flower Shadow, King Pin, Claw Fingers, Blue Demon, The Flute Prince, and Cripple all fall under Ren's golden sword. Only the elusive Blood Lotus (Joey Wong) with her unmatched skill continues to escape capture. This is in part due to Lui Bui (Siu Yuk-lung), the captain of the guard whose growing love for her impairs his judgment. Surrounded by an ill-aureole for the many deaths he has caused despite his righteousness, Ren retires and takes his wife, daughter, and his oddly named protégé Quick Kid (Chin Siu-ho) and opens a restaurant. But Blood Lotus takes advantage of the situation in order to seek her revenge in a rather gruesome fashion. She's unable to finish the job, but the ghosts of the Blood Brother gang return to sentence Ren to death. A magical struggle begins involving the ghostly gang, Ren and Quick Kid, a mob of demon kids, one imp, and even the powerful Guardian of Hell (Wu Ma) who prefaces his actions with the amusing chant, "magic powers activate."

What could have been another decent Hong Kong fantasy film in the vein of *The Bride with White Hair* only falls flat under its own weight. The story is riddled with inconsistencies and seemingly random acts of nonsense that appear to be the result of quickly piecing together a script moments before each scene is shot. At over two hours in length, the film is in desperate need of major cuts to repair its sluggish pace. But that wouldn't help the fact that this film is merely a ragged patchwork of better Hong Kong films.

Joey Wong is cast in a role very similar to Brigitte Lin in *The Bride with White Hair*. She gives it the old college try, but she lacks Lin's intensity and ends up marginalized by the fantasy elements. Visual effects in Hong Kong films have been rare, even after being reintroduced by Tsui Hark in 1983 with the release of *Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain*. They only began to rival Hollywood when CGI was introduced at the end of the '90s. *The Beheaded 1000* throws in just about everything including animated spiders, miniature sets, creature effects ripped out of *Gremlins*, and tons of cut and paste work resulting in unintentionally humorous beheadings and walking corpses.

It is nice to see Jimmy Wang Yu in one final action role, even if it's in a film no better or worse than any of his other second-rate films produced since the mid-'70s. There really is very little quality kung fu action and only a single fight with thugs in a factory midway through that is worth mentioning. The rest of the film's action is all posing, effects, and other fluff. Much of it

harkens back to the days before real kung fu action was introduced in the '70s. You will see Joey Wong fly around on a giant kite, Wang Yu performing only a swashbuckling style of swordplay, and even genre veteran Chin Siu-ho reduced to stabbing at thin air overlaid with poorly animated spiders. I actually don't mind these references to the film industry's roots, but it appears less an homage and more like the best some uninspired filmmakers could do on a small budget. For action fans, it certainly offers nothing of value, except to sate the curiosity of anyone looking for a lot of leftover, '80s-era special effects applied to an inferior min-'90s swordplay film.

The Beheaded 1000 would be tolerable if it had stuck to its modest action and fantasy effects. But the painfully contrived angst and ultra-heroic tone towards the end, especially when its drawn out endlessly is terrible. For this reason alone, there should be no regrets in passing up on this film altogether. (by Mark Pollard of Kung Fu Cinema)

Blade, The (Hong Kong, 1995: Tsui Hark) - Vietnamese born, American trained, and Hong Kong famed director/producer Tsui Hark is a curious fellow. One of a handful of film makers in Hong Kong who seem genuinely interested in the art instead of the just the business, Hark revolutionized Hong Kong films with the release of his fantasy *epic Zu: Warriors from the Magic Mountain*. He went on to direct many of the best films of the Hong Kong new wave, including *Once Upon a Time in China*, the film that made a major star out of Jet Li.

His role as director is dwarfed only by his role as producer. Under Hark's guidance, films like *A Better Tomorrow*, *The Killer*, *Chinese Ghost Story*, and the *Swordsman* saga all made tremendous impact on the film scene and made megastars of guys like John Woo, Ching Siu-tung, and Chow Yun-fat. After teaming with dean Shek to create Film Workshop, Tsui Hark solidified his position as one of the most important people in the history of Hong Kong cinema.

It's no surprise then that Hark is characterized by the fiery temper and personality that marks many of the world's great artists. No man is perfect, after all, and Hark's often overbearing personality cause his professional break-up with men like Jet Li, John Woo, and Ching Siu-tung. Hark could create stars, but he couldn't keep them. Strangely enough, each man would go on to great stardom in their post-Hark career, but few would make films as great as the ones made while they worked with Tsui Hark.

Tsui Hark's personality and politics have always been at the forefront of his films. He is a man with great need to express political and social discontent working in an industry that places little or no value on such lofty things. In Hong Kong film, just as in Hong Kong music, it's about entertainment and profit, and there is no independent film circuit like there is in Europe, Japan, or the United States. Thus, Hark's most ambitious films like the scathing downer *Don't Play With Fire* met with less than negative criticism. They met with total disregard, as if they'd never been made.

It's a trend that would no doubt frustrate Hark throughout his career, which would be peppered by box office hits and punctuated with a daring and meaningful total flop. In the latter half of the 1990s, with the Hong Kong film market in a severe rut and most of the established talent heading for the greener pastures of Hollywood in the face of Communist reunification, the ardently anti-Communist Hark chose to remain behind in Hong Kong, directing a series of films that, for various reasons, didn't do much of anything. His comedy *Chinese Feast* was a tremendous hit both in Hong Kong and the US, no doubt as much because it starred current flavor of the month Anita Yuen as it was simply a great little film.

On the flipside, Hark's decidedly darker romantic tragedy, *The Lovers*, met with slightly less success than the peppy *Chinese Feast* despite starring up and coming talent Charlie Yeung and teen heart-throb Nicky Wu. No one wanted to see them suffer and die. Tsui Hark's return to fantasy, *Green Snake* was a flop, but not so great a flop as his return to the world of martial arts. *THE BLADE* did so poorly in Hong Kong that many Chinatown theaters here in the United States didn't even bother to release it. Kungfu was no longer in style, and the best days of the martial arts epic were long forgotten in favor of Category III sleaze and Young and Dangerous clones.

A case of bad timing for all involved, since the tremendous failure of *The Blade* is by no means an accurate gauge by which to measure the quality of the film, which is, I think, one of the greatest martial arts films of all time, and one of the most impressive accomplishments of Tsui Hark's amazing career.

The failure of *The Blade* was partially a result of the unpopularity of kungfu films when it came out. It was also partially due to the fact that the film is one of Hark's most savage, bleak, and violent films to date, an angry scream at a time when people only wanted lustful moans or wacky laughing. Anxiety over the 1997 reunification meant people didn't want to receive more anxiety from a film.

The Blade is a remake of the Shaw Brothers classic *One-Armed Swordsman*, which was, in its day, one of the most violent and shocking martial arts dramas ever made. It made a star of young Jimmy Wang Yu, who built a career on playing one-armed guys. It was a beautifully filmed, tragically moving testament to how good a martial arts film can be. I don't need to tell those of you reading this review that martial arts films are almost always dismissed as utter crap by a population who can't separate a good film from a bad one or recognize that poorly dubbed cheapies on late night television do not speak for the whole genre.

Not that we have anything against poorly dubbed late-night cheapies. I just think it's a shame that kungfu films never got the proper respect lavished on other martial arts films, primarily the samurai film. Plenty of shitty samurai films got cranked out, especially during the 1970s, but no one lets that drag down brilliant work like *Hidden Fortress* or the *Samurai* trilogy. For some reason, though, kungfu never got the same acceptance, not even by its own makers. It's too bad that Hong Kong film studios don't have the same respect for their product as Japanese and American film makers. Hundreds of classic Hong Kong films are rotting away in warehouses, disregarded by an industry that has no interest in the old or in the value of the films as a work of art. Too bad for all of us.

Zhao Wen-zhou assumes the title role of On, an orphan who is adopted by a master swordmaker and blacksmith. Zhao Wen-zhou is best known as Jet Li's "replacement" in the role of Wong Fei-hong in *Once Upon a Time in China* parts four and five. The timing of his career is nearly as tragic as the downfall of Tsui Hark. Zhao is a tremendous talent. He's in great shape, possessed of amazing martial arts ability, and is an incredibly sexy, attractive man on top of all that. Every woman I know who has seen him in a movie swooned, and more than a few guys found themselves possessed of mysterious "urges" as well. Whether you are hetero or homo, there's no denying that Zhao Wen-zhou is an amazing person to behold.

He's a good actor as well, possessing charisma and presence. Unfortunately, he was making a name for himself in the martial arts genre, which was a dying genre. When your star rises in a falling sky, there's not much you can do. Thus, Zhao will probably be relegated to the back pages of popularity, a sidenote when he should have been a whole chapter.

On and his best friend Iron Head spend the day stripped down and sweating in the forge. Just as Hark's previous film, *Green Snake* explored the sexual energy between two women (Joey Wang and Maggie Cheung), *The Blade* repays the female favor with tons of male-male sexual tension. There are plenty of naked male asses and bare, muscular chests on display for all to behold.

Ling, the daughter of the forgemaster falls in love with both the reserved On and the fiery but good-natured Iron Head. She's a tragic young woman who has grown up without any friends, moving from town to town, slowly growing to hate humanity, desperately seeking companionship while at the same time utterly despising it. She is, as the film reveals, a victim of the grandiose delusions of heroism that fuel the men around her.

She decides to amuse herself by pitting both On and Iron Head against one another in a battle for her affections. Unfortunately, the bond between the two men is strong, and her manipulation is overshadowed by the fact that On is named as the new head of the foundry. This creates tension among the workers, many of whom see him as a charity case and not deserving of the post.

While in town one day, On and Iron Head witness a heroic monk beating the asses of a gang of thugs. When the monk is later ambushed and murdered by the gang, Iron Head flies into a fit of uncontrollable rage and challenges the thugs to a fight with the men at the foundry.

On also discovers that his father was murdered by a bald, tattooed assassin with the ability to fly, or so they say. The broken blade that serves as the symbol of peace and prosperity for the foundry is the blade of his slain father, who fought the villain alongside the foundry master.

He is overcome with rage confounded by the fact that he wants to prove himself to the other workers. He decides to ride out and confront the gang on his own. Ling tries to stop him but is captured by the gang. On fights valiantly, dispatching dozens of baddies before his arm is caught in the signature weapon of the gang -- a steel bear trap attached to a chain. His arm is severed at the elbow and he is knocked off a cliff just as his brothers from the factory arrive to finish the fight.

A wounded On is discovered by a freaky sidekick, a girl I think, but you can't be too sure. She looks sort of like that freaky Rust character from *Tetsuo*. But take note here. If you ever intend on becoming a vengeance-seeking stranger, you need to have a freaky teenage sidekick, like Chow Yun-fat in *Full Contact*, a really ugly little dog. The girl (I think) lives in the ruins of her family farm. Like On, she is an orphan.

On decides to forsake vengeance and help the girl on her farm, living as a recluse. Ling goes even more insane than she was to begin with, and she and Iron Head set out to find the missing On. Nothing goes very well for any of them. Iron Head keeps picking fights with thugs and being seduced by malicious women who hate the men around them. For good reasons, mind you, as most of the men are scum. Ling refuses to accept Iron Head but hates him for eying other women.

In the meantime, On and Black Head, the name he gives his often dirt-covered new friend, find their home is in the migratory path of some spooky bandits in Arabic garb. They burn the house down, beat up Black Head, and try to flay On alive. On is frustrated by his lack of an arm until he discovers a charred martial arts manual depicting a unique "short sword" style. He takes up his father's broken blade and begins developing a new style based on the manual. The next time the bandits ride by, On is ready for them and dispatches them all with bloody skill.

The leader of the brigands hires the bald, tattooed assassin to take out On and settle a score with the men at the sword foundry. Iron Head and his men fight valiantly but are no match for the bandits. Only On can stand up to them and, in the process, avenge his father's death.

The final scene is a poignant exploration of Ling's deteriorating mental state as she, now an old woman, indulges her self in the delusion that Iron Head and On often come to visit her, and that despite all that has happened, they laugh and remain good friends. In reality, of course, she is as lonely an old woman as she was a young one.

The film is quite bloody and savage. Hark's direction is superb, perfectly capturing the scenes of intensity and rage and capturing every emotion on camera. It makes for a breath-taking, dark, mentally exhausting film. He also manages to capture some moments of real beauty. The whole cast is great, but Zhao really shines as the humble man wrestling with his newfound rage.

The martial arts are pretty good. Hark makes use of some camera tricks and wire work, but none of it is gratuitous or obvious. For the most part, he uses technique to augment the action, to make it even more unnerving and brutal. At no point does the film degenerate into the "human yoyo" style of martial arts filmmaking in which actors are just hoisted all over the place and look plain goofy. The choreography fits the bleak mood of the film perfectly. I liken it in many ways, both the action and the overall mood, to the equally furious Liu Chia-liang film *Eight Diagram Pole Fighter*, another film that sort of served as the end point of an era.

I'm pleased to see that despite being a financial and critical flop, a lot of fans are embracing and celebrating this film as a monumental achievement in the genre. It certainly deserves the praise. The second half of the 1990s have been a sad time for Hong Kong films, and especially for martial arts films. With absolute dreck like Donnie Yen's *Legend of the Wolf* pretending to speak for the current state of the genre, it's refreshing to find something like *The Blade* that features great acting, compelling writing, relentless action, and Tsui Hark's signature cynicism and bleak outlook on human nature.

It's not a cheery film. It is a great one, though. (by Keith Allison of Teleport City)

Blade of Fury (Hong Kong, 1993: Sammo Hung) - Ah yes, the Wuxia movie. For those of you who don't know what it is, the best way to sum up its meaning is "flying swordsman movie." The wuxia has recently risen in popularity to a certain degree because of the international success of Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and Zhang Yimou's *Hero*. This genre of film, a lot of which is based on Chinese literature, has been around for decades. I'm not sure if I can define it in a way that does it justice, but my experience with the genre limits what I can say about it. I guess you could define the genre as, "a type of period martial arts film with an unnecessarily convoluted plot and over-the-top action, including swordplay, esoteric martial arts, and other crazy things."

I won't necessarily attempt to give a history of the Wuxia Pien, as it's often referred. I know that the Shaw Bros. made a few dozen (if not more) of these types of movies back during the 1970s with actors like Ti Lung and stuff. The popularity of these movies died down with time but as 1990 hit, filmmakers Ching Siu-Tung and Tsui Hark breathed new life into the genre with *Swordsman*. This movie's success, along with the success of *Once Upon a Time in China* the following year, kicked off the beginning of the Hong Kong "New Wave," a sort of "rebirth" of

the old school period piece, but now with more sophisticated fight choreography and wire stunts.

Well, all of the great directors and choreographers got in on the hype. Ching Siu-Tung, Phillip Kwok, Yuen Tak, Corey Yuen, the Yuen Clan (Yuen Woo-Ping and company), Donnie Yen, Chris Lee, Yuen Bun, and several others churned out martial arts movies in large quantities. It was only appropriate that Sammo Hung, who had worked on the many of best movies made in Hong Kong in both the 1970s and 1980s would get involved with this new trend. I mean, he was one of the top three choreographers of the old school and arguably the best of the HK action film, which flourished until 1990. You'd think that he'd be just as prolific in the 1990s as well. Well, not quite. He participated in about four movies or so during the New Wave. He directed two movies (*Blade of Fury* and *Moon Warriors*) and worked as choreographer in two more (*Kung Fu Cult Master* and *Ashes of Time*). I don't think any of these movies had a lasting effect at the box-office, although *Ashes of Time* did earn Sammo a nomination for best action direction, a nomination that he hadn't seen in five years. Nonetheless, Sammo can be proud that most of these movies have strong cult reputations, which in reality, is probably better than being whatever trendy movie that brings in the dough at the HK box office.

Hung's popularity began to wane in the late 1980s. Part of it had to do with the box-office failure of some of this big budget masterpieces, including his war-pic *Easter Condors*. Another part of it had to do with his falling out with Jackie Chan, who had gone on to bigger (although not always better) movies whereas Sammo Hung's popularity continued to decline. I guess another factor in Hung's loss of popularity was his frowned-upon relationship with Joyce Mina Godenzi, the Australian/Chinese actress who had won Miss Hong Kong and had started a small career as an femme fatale actress to. I guess Hong Kong people love gossip just as much as the next person and this can often cast a shadow on the career of anyone who's hot at the moment. So anyways, although Hung continued to make movies with superior action quality, they were often ignored by the Hong Kong Critics in favor of whatever Jackie Chan or Ching Siu-Tung was directing at the moment.

So that finally brings us to our movie, doesn't it? This movie begins with a small opening prologue making reference to the Sino-Japanese War and how China conceded Taiwan to Japan as a result. Because of this, a special guerilla force, the Black Flag Troop, was formed to protect China from invaders. We then open to a training session with the troop, led by Big Sword Wong (Yeung Fan). After doing some excellent sword forms, the team embarks on its first mission: destroy a camp of Japanese soldiers located nearby.

The attack is ill-fated, as every member of the troop except Wong is mowed down or overpowered by the superior firepower of the Japanese. Wong does manage to blow up their munitions tent and kill the commander in a rather exaggerated death scene, in which we learn that throwing a sword at someone has the same effect as shooting them with one of those railguns from *Eraser*.

Skip some years ahead and we meet Tan (Ti Lung), a rising government official, and his chatterbox servant, Nine Catties (Cynthia Khan). They are on their way to Beijing in order for him to receive a promotion or something like that (I watched the Portuguese dub so I wasn't able to pick up everything). They stop at an inn for food and lodge. (Note: There's an interesting moment of dubbed dialogue where Nine Catties mentions going to capital and eating crab and sugar cane drink. I doubt that was the original dialogue used, but I imagine that crab is eaten in China and I did see cans of sugar cane drink at the Asian stores in California so maybe the translation is correct). Well, shortly after they arrive, a team of bandits arrive riding Bactrian camels (which is geographically correct) setting up an ambush. The

intended victims? The Green Troop, led by Yuen Shih-Kai Well, the Qings are smart enough to spot the ambush, so they hide themselves in a crowd of refugees heading in that direction. They get in and soon a battle erupts between the bandits and the Qing soldiers. Tan and Catties join the fracas to help the refugees caught in the middle and are helped by Wong, who's now working as a blacksmith in the area.

Tan is impressed with Wong and tries to convince him to go to Beijing with him. At first he refuses, not wanting to get back in the game. But eventually, his love of country gets the better of him and he decides to join Tan and the soldiers. When they get to Beijing, Tan and Shih-Kai help Wong to set up a martial arts school. The martial arts school, which I understand is supposed to be a school for training soldiers, is actually a front for Tan's activities.

Tan is an idealist and a reformer. He's a patriot who loves his country but doesn't agree with the way the government is being run. Therefore, he wants to strengthen the government, especially the Emperor, by doing away with the Dowager Empress. I understood that the school was supposed to train the forces needed to accomplish such actions.

Anyways, Wong is invited to a tournament which is used to promote martial arts and unify the people. The problem is that the "best" participant of the tournament is a Grade-A prick and a show-off. You know the kind, the jerk that's so talented that he wants to rub it in by beating all his opponents to death even after he's clearly won or conceded defeat. Bolo Yeung's character in *Bloodsport* was one, this guy is another. Well, Wong gets involved with the tournament to teach the little punk a lesson he humiliates him in three moves. That gets the kid's dad, a retired champion, into the fight and soon Wong and him are all over the place fighting.

I guess it's human nature to be competitive. So, it's interesting how we sometimes like to use competition to promote unity. Sometimes it works, but oftentimes it doesn't. Once Upon a Time in China III, had a similar theme, where the Lion Dance was planned as a way of promoting kung fu and unifying the people and in the end, it was just a (violent) popularity contest. The same thing happens in real life. In my church, we sometimes have "fun" games and quiz bowls and stuff that almost always end in arguments because the adults get far too competitive, forgetting that the original purpose of everything was to promote integration among the churchgoers.

A further note on kung fu tournaments. It seems as if the general set-up of a period-piece martial arts tournament is to two guys duke it out. Whoever wins can be challenged by another. Whoever wins that can be challenged by another and so forth. As is par for the course with these movies, there almost always is some champion who beats up everyone except for the hero, who gets in and dishes out the goodness against the champion, who's often one of those aforementioned arrogant, brutal types.

Anyways, after Wong shows himself to be a formidable fighter, the governor of the region (I guess) decides that he might be a danger to the Empire or something. So he decides to do away with him. According to the aforementioned tournament, the winner would take on the Japanese champion, a midget named Banko. Really. Well, Wong is invited to meet Banko but is warned not to fight him (for political reasons or something). So, one evening Banko comes to Wong's school to challenge him. The two are about to fight when the government officials arrive and throw Wong in jail for disobeying orders.

The governor tries to kill Wong inside the jail but Tan comes to free with an order from the king. Together, Tan, Wong and Shih-Kai plan to carry out their plans to reform the government, but soon, outside forces force them all to choose which side they'll be loyal to.

That's kind of the plot in a nutshell. There are several subplots and character relationships that I glossed over. It's a well-done story; it's probably one of the few "new wave" movies outside of the first three *OUATIC* films that actually tries to build a story on politics, Chinese history, and true patriotic themes. That in itself makes the movie a lot more interesting and the story more compelling. It is the story of patriots whose ideals and love of country leads to the inevitable conflict with the way things are. Wong and Tan truly to love China and don't want to see it fall victim to the foreigners. Unfortunately, the only way to reach that point is through violence. As in the opening fight scene, their lofty ideals are ill fated from the beginning not because they're necessarily wrong, but they are simply outnumbered.

I have to say this is something of an epic movie. There are large-scale action scenes, big outdoor scenes, a large cast of characters: everything seems to be on a large scale. In reality, in spite of the fact that this is often considered to be a New Wave period martial arts film, the movie harkens back to the Mainland martial arts movie from the previous decade. Those movies, several of which starred Jet Li, had excellent ensemble casts of talented wushu stylists and martial artists, great Chinese scenery, patriotic plots, great mass fight scenes, and were all around entertaining affairs. This movie has all of that and in addition, it benefits from the presence of Sammo Hung, a talented director and experienced choreographer, something that many Mainland movies didn't have (except for *Martial Arts of Shaolin*).

Sammo Hung rounds up an excellent cast of characters for this movie. The role of Big Sword Wong is filled by Yeung Fan, a relatively-unknown but very talented martial arts actor. I'm not sure where he hails from, although maybe he's a Mainlander. Physically, he does great and shows off more authentic swordplay in 100 minutes than in most New Wave wuxia films combined. His character is an example of what one may call a true patriot. He is willing to fight for his country and his ideals in spite of the overwhelming odds, which is his major virtue and his major flaw. Not only is he a patriot, but he's an all-around good guy, as evidenced by his involvement in the tournament and his jumping into the conflict between the Qings and the bandits to save the refugees.

By his side is Tan, played by Ti Lung, a star of many Shaw Brothers movies from the 1970s and 1980s. Ti's career began to flounder in the 1980s and he started to become an alcoholic. However, new life was breathed into his career when John Woo chose him to star in *A Better Tomorrow*, a movie that launched John Woo and Chow Yun-Fat into stardom and started the whole Heroic Bloodshed genre, of which Ti Lung participated in several films. Anyways, Ti's role in this movie is mainly an acting one, so anyone who wants to see Ti bust it out like in the old days will be disappointed. However, he does a great job as the idealist who has great plans for his country, but too loses to treachery and being simply outgunned. While Tan's and Wong's fates are sealed by the end of the movie, they have a hope in a life to come and in the future generations of Chinese.

Playing Tan's servant is Cynthia Khan, one of the great actresses of the Girls n' Guns films that Hong Kong churned out during the late 80s and early 90s. Cynthia had a prolific career during these times, although not all of her movies were the best showcases for her talents. During the 1990s, she worked on a few different New Wave period pieces, including this movie, *Zen of Sword*, and *Thirteen Cold-Blooded Eagles*. This movie actually has one of her best performances, as she plays a little bit of everything. During most of the movie, her character is the comic relief, supplying a lot of light moments with playful banter between her and Ti Lung. However, in the last act of the movie, she shows more range as we get to see her in both sad and vengeful forms. In her cop movies, she often played the same straight-arrow role the

whole way through. Here, we get a lot more range from her. Fighting-wise, she gets two fight scenes: a short scene early on and then we get to see her fight in the finale.

One of the supporting players that I'd like to comment on is Ngai Sing. Nowadays he is known as Collin Chou, but for a long time he was known by this pseudonym. He's a very good martial artist: one of the greatest kickers in post-Hwang Jang Lee times. Westerners will recognize him as Seraph from the second two *Matrix* films but Hong Kong film fans know him as a perpetual bad guy on the level of Billy Chow and Hwang Jang Lee. He played villainous roles in many movies. Anyway, I believe this was one of his earlier movies, before he was typecast as a villain. I'm not sure, but I think he was discovered by Sammo Hung. One of his first movies was *License to Steal*, where he played alongside Joyce Mina Godenzi and Yuen Biao. That was a Sammo Hung-produced film. He also starred as Sammo's rival the following year in *Slickers vs. Killers*. The same year as this movie, Ngai appeared in Jet Li's *Kung Fu Cult Master*, which was also choreographed by Sammo Hung. What's interesting is that he's been cast as the villain so many times that it's hard to imagine him in any other role. Yet, in this movie, we get to see him play a good guy, which is rare. He plays a student of the kung fu master that spars with Wong at the tournament, who abandons him to study with Wong. He becomes Wong's best student and participates in the finale alongside Wong and Cynthia Khan. His fighting is limited, but it's good to see him in a role different from the norm.

Cast and plot commentaries aside, we all know that the calling card of this movie is the action. I have to say that this is one of the most satisfying wuxia films that I've seen in terms of action. The thing is that a lot of the flying swordsman movies made during the 1990s were often made with actors who weren't martial artists, so the technique-driven swordplay was often lost in a sea of complicated wire effects, special FX, optical FX, explosions, and a lot of eye-candy. Sure, a lot of it was really creative and stuff. But when you have movies involving martial arts scrolls and leaders of the martial world and stuff, and everyone spends more time flying than performing authentic martial arts, it gets rather irritating. Luckily, Sammo Hung sticks to his roots and puts a strong emphasis on traditional martial arts action. Sure, there is a fair amount of wirework, but most of it is used mainly for enhancing movement rather than replacing authentic martial arts. Even in the tournament scene where Yeung Fan and his opponent start fighting on top of umbrellas, this fact is downplayed in favor of hand-to-hand itself.

Most of the action is weapons-based, with an emphasis on swords (natch!). We get to see the players fighting with short swords (which look like glorified meat cleavers), Chinese broadswords (what Donnie Yen fights with at the end of *Dragon Gate Inn*), spears, katanas, a Chinese rope-dart weapon that looks like a yo-yo, etc. The choreography is excellent, as good as anyone could expect from Sammo. In addition to the weapons action, there are some good sword forms including those with the short sword and a drunken sword form. For those of you who like a little hand-to-hand action, there is a tournament scene that shows off some good wushu, pa-kua (for those of you who watch mainstream films, see Jet Li's *The One* for more on that style), and other styles. There is also some good hand-to-hand at the end.

A lot of people complain about the pacing of this movie. I found nothing wrong with it. Many Sammo Hung movies have a tendency to have several short fight scenes leading up to balls-to-the-wall climax where everyone gets involved. This movie has a lot of big action scenes spaced out at good intervals, thus balancing the action and the storyline. The finale is done in the classic Sammo style of a big free-for-all with everyone kicking butt. It's like the finales to the Shaolin Temple movies, where everyone busts it out, with some of the players taking on bad guys en masse and others getting involved in more personal brawls.

There are some complaints about the action. Most people tend to complain about the undercranking that Sammo Hung uses. It's there; I won't deny that. I'm not always that distracted by speeded up fight scenes. It doesn't bother me when Donnie does it, nor when Ching Siu-Tung does it, nor when Sammo Hung does it. There is only scene where it really looked awkward and that's in the climax when Yeung Fan is fighting Lau Shun.

Interestingly enough, the major flaw of the action is also its greatest virtue. Sammo Hung has never been all that good at wirework. He's not terrible, but he certainly doesn't have the talent that his contemporaries Yuen Woo-Ping, Ching Siu-Tung, and Corey Yuen have at choreographing a creative wire-fu scene. Actually, oftentimes his use of wires is very awkward. You watch movies like this and *The Medallion* and you notice a certain lack of polish and smoothness that other movies have. In the beginning, when Black Flag Troop storms the Japanese camp, the troop jumps around like kangaroos. This becomes less of a problem as the movie progresses. But, like many Mainland films from the early 1980s, the deficiencies in the wire department are easily overlooked because of the high quality of the martial arts on display. In a movie where the action was dependent on the wires, this would be something of a fatal flaw. However, it's not so much a problem in this movie.

Another comment on the fight scenes is the photography. In a lot of Sammo movies in the 1990s, he began working with different styles of photography. One style that is almost a signature style for him is the use of switching back and forth between fast (at times undercranked) motion and a slightly blurred slow motion. Some of the fights in this movie, especially in the climax, feature this. This style of filming the fight scenes was seen in *Kung Fu Cult Master*, *Thunderbolt*, and *The Medallion*. Actually, it was used a lot in Wong Kar-Wai's *Ashes of Time*, which earned Sammo Hung a nomination for Best Action Direction in 1994. I think it's kind of cool. Whatever you think, all I have to say is don't blink during the fight scenes or you're sure to miss something—they're that fast.

A lot of the more recent wuxia films, including *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Hero* are, believe it or not, very watered-down in the violence department. I suspect this is because these movies were made with the goal of international distribution and as such, Ang Lee and Zhang Yimou wanted them to appeal to a wide audience. I don't have any problem with this; I actually don't care on the whole for over-the-top, bloody violence (in spite of the fact that many of the more entertaining movies tend to have a lot of that). Well, if you are more accustomed to these more sanitized swordplay movies, than I'll inform you now that the flying swordplay movies of the New Wave were on the other side of the spectrum. They were, more often than not, ultra violent affairs, with people getting hacked to pieces (often literally too) in large quantities. This movie is definitely no different, especially in the beginning where the Wong's men get blown to pieces by advanced Japanese weaponry as they futilely cut the Japanese platoon to ribbons with their swords. This movie miraculously got a "12 and older" rating here in Brazil, although maybe the censors didn't take the violence seriously, like when one of the villains gets cut in half in the end (it's done in an almost funny way).

Well, the extreme violence of the movie makes me hesitate to recommend it. I'm not sure how to go about recommending movies with so much violent material. I know that a lot of the movies I recommended so far aren't all angelic material, but this is probably the bloodiest one that I've reviewed yet. Well, here in Brazil the movie is the equivalent of PG-13, but in the U.S., it'd certainly get an R rating. Well, judge for yourself. The movie definitely has a good story, an excellent cast, a epic scope, and satisfies immensely in the action department. I mean, the movie is called *Blade of Fury* and certainly doesn't slouch in the swordplay department whereas movies with titles like *Zen of Sword* and *Swordsman* disappointingly give us more special FX than swordplay. That in itself is enough to place this movie at the top of the New

Wave. (by Blake Matthews)

Bride with White Hair (Hong Kong, 1993: Ronny Yu) - I recently read of some film professor who was delineating the differences between the narrative media. Despite the popular identification, movies are not really similar to novels, he said; probably the single other media most like film is poetry.

He didn't provide any examples, but I can: *The Bride With White Hair*. The first word that came to mind when trying to describe it was "lyrical." The entire enterprise is focused on evocative tableaux, rich and filling visuals, strong and true emotion, and a devotion to atmosphere that knows few peers.

Sure, the plot's stretched a little thin -- but what were you expecting, a novel?

Our story proper is actually a flashback, told ten years after the fact by ex-Wu Tang fighter Zhuo Yi-Hang (Leslie Cheung, looking like he just came off a three-day bender), now a hermit atop a mounting, guarding a fabled flower which is said to bloom only once every twenty years, and to give eternal youth to whoever eats it. He even kills three emissaries from the ailing emperor. Why is he so steadfastly guarding this flower? Cue the harp runs and the wavy picture dissolve...

Way back, Yi-Hang was a well-trained but somewhat irreverent youth of the Wu Tang clan. Though loved by the Clan Master (Fong Pao), he was one the hit list of the Second-in-Command Pai Yun (Lok Lam Law), largely because Yi-Hang was favored to be the Master's successor, and Pai Yun wanted his own daughter Lu Hua to have a chance at that position (even though tradition forbade it).

Also notable in his youth, Yi-Fang once stole a goat and in his escape was pursued by wolves -- but was rescued by a young girl on a hillside, who played a pipe that the wolves mysteriously obeyed.

Fast-forward to adulthood (i.e., ten years before the prologue). Yi-Fang is in his prime as both a fighter and a rabble-rouser, and he already looks like he's suffering from a heavy hangover. He's got a well-developed sense of justice, though, and a semi-disrespect for authority that still has him on Pai Yun's bad side. He's also got a love-hate thing going with Lu Hua (Kit Ying Lam).

Meanwhile, some poor people have managed to get ahold of some Imperial provisions, and are in the process of satisfying their hunger, when the Emperor's troops move in and start carving them up. Who can save them? How about Wolf Girl (Brigitte Lin), a wire-assisted kung fu fighter with a whip that can cut a man in half. She makes short and brutal work of the attacking soldiers, and then she accidentally meets Yi-Hang, who is helping a refugee husband deliver his wife's baby. There's that [ooh! ooh!] electric spark between them -- so much so that Yi-Hang surreptitiously follows Wolf Girl back to her cave lair and watches her bathe -- and she doesn't kill him when she catches him. It must be love.

But the course of true love (even true kung fu love) can't possibly run smooth, because it turns out that Wolf Girl is a trained assassin for the Ji Wushuang, an upstart clan dedicated to challenging the standard Eight Clans (including the Wu Tang) -- and led by a male and female twins (Francis Ng and Elaine Lui) conjoined at the back! (That's like they put a big sticker on the video and said, "Nathan, you need to watch this!") The twins are super-duper fighters with

magical abilities, and the male one has the extreme hots for Wolf Girl. (The female one just likes making snarky remarks.)

To make matters worse, Yi-Hang is chosen reluctantly as the leader of the Wu Tang troops for the coming conflict -- which means that when the Ji Wushuang sneak attacks, he's out there kicking ass until he confronts Wolf Girl. After some aerial hijinx, he finally drops his sword, unwilling to fight her -- and then Wolf Girl takes a poisoned dart to the back from Lu Hua.

Yi-Hang gets her back to her lair, and what follows is the sensuous "poison-sucking" scene, followed by more general, ah, physical activity. Yi-Hang is tired of the constant warfare and position-jockeying; Wolf Girl is tired of being under the thumb of the Ji Wushuang. Maybe they should just run off together. Just as soon as they discharge their responsibilities...

Yi-Hang makes a vow to always trust Wolf Girl, which just had me cringing, because whenever someone says something like that -- every damned time -- you know that they're just setting themselves up for the trickeries of Fate. Because what happens? Wolf Girl goes through hell to get out of the Ji Wushuang and be free to love Yi-Hang, but she gets set up to take the blame for an almost-complete massacre of the Wu Tang (which the survivors also blame on Yi-Hang for trusting that damned Wolf Girl).

So much about this movie is worthy of praise. Set and costume design purposely turned away from the normal course of shooting on-location in mainland China, and instead used gothicized sets to build a visual identity that supports the larger-than-life characters. The emotional core of the movie -- the tension between love and trust -- is a mix of the conflicts at centers of *Romeo & Juliet* and *Othello* (not the plots, just the emotional conflict). Impressive visual tableaux are so consistently breathtaking (an early scene of young Yi-Hang training takes place entirely in silhouette against an orange sunset sky) that the hyperbolic wirework and magic seem to be in their natural setting.

Yes, there are flaws. Thanks to the concentration on scene-level lyricism and elaborately-staged tableaux, the linear quality of the plot is compromised; it seems a strangely short plot to fill a ninety-minute movie, and loses some momentum by being pretty.

But if that's the worst criticism, then it's still ahead of most movies. There is much to enjoy here, and it needs to be enjoyed as it is presented sumptuously to your eyes, without the "Hey, wait --" impulse. Deserving of praise. See it. (by Nathan Shumate of Cold Fusion Video)

Bride with White Hair 2 (Hong Kong, 1993: Ronny Yu) - Part of the problem with most sequels is that they're literally afterthoughts. Most well-done movies try to be a complete viewing experience in and of themselves; I mean, how pissed would you be if you paid eight bucks to see a movie (or even two bucks to rent the video) and found out that you got half the story? Especially since the making of a sequel is (in all but a few cases) completely dependent on how well the first one does -- which could very well mean that you're given the first half of the story, and the second half is never made. Those few movies which had successful sequels were designed specifically to both present a self-contained story in the first installment, and, if the box-office dollars were there, to have somewhere to go. That's why the first *Star Wars* ended at a good stopping spot, while *The Empire Strikes Back* ended with a complete cliffhanger: they didn't know if *Empire* would be made, but by the time they made *Empire* they knew damned sure that *Return of the Jedi* would be financed.

In most cases, though, a sequel is forced to sweep up any leftover plot bits from the first movie and try to milk them for enough story to make a second whole movie. And since the best nickels have already been spent in the first movie, the sequel comes in wanting.

And if you're expecting me to say, "But *The Bride With White Hair 2* is different," well, sorry to add to the disappointment in your life.

The first *Bride With White Hair* had a tragic ending, in the classical sense: A downer conclusion caused by the foibles and faults of the protagonists. However, thanks to the fact (presumably) that the original novel on which it was based left the protagonists alive, there was a danger not present in other tragedies, such as, say, *Romeo & Juliet*; somebody's going to say, "Gosh, that's just too sad! We can't leave them that way -- the story's not over until there's a happy ending!" (On a side note, I just realized that someone could do a "happy ending" sequel to *Romeo & Juliet* if they make it a zombie love story. Boy, I've got to stop telling these ideas to the world.)

Unfortunately, there was really nowhere for the characters of Cho Yi-Hang (Leslie Cheung) and Lien Ni-Chang, aka Moonlight (Brigitte Lin) to go after the end of the first movie; their character arcs had run their course. So this second movie largely has to follow completely new characters, using the tragic love story of Cho and Moonlight almost as set dressing.

This time around, our ill-fated couple is Kit (Sunny Chan), nephew to Cho Yi-Hang and heir-by-default to the Wu Tang clan, since most of the clan was massacred in the first movie, and Moonlight's been picking them off as best she can for the last ten years. In an effort to protect the clan, Kit's wedding to his sweetheart Lyre (Joey Meng) is hastened so that they can get an heir as soon as possible. (A side note on Lyre: In the dubbed version, it sounds like her name is "Yu Koug" or something like that. I have no idea where "Lyre" came from in every published credits list I've seen.) Naturally, Moonlight attacks just as the honeymoon's about to start, killing men all over just for the heck of it -- with her prehensile hair! Given that she also demonstrates some violent psychokinesis all through the movie, one has to wonder why the prehensile hair gets so much play, especially because it's pretty unconvincing (it looks just like what it is -- huge loops of fake nylon hair), and calls to mind nothing so much as Medusa from Marvel's *The Inhumans* comics.

Kit's not really much of a kung fu fighter, and his best friend Liu Hang (Richard Suen) saves his life by knocking him over the head with a mallet and dumping him down the secret garbage chute. Lyre, meanwhile, is kidnapped by Moonlight in order to show her the errors of ever trusting and loving a man.

See, Moonlight has assembled herself a cadre of manhaters to help her with her goal of eliminating the Eight Clans. Each has been wronged, spurned, or trodden upon by the men in their lives, and thus they all end up speaking with such radical feminist fervor that Andrea Dworkin would be proud. Moonlight's second in command, Yuen-Yuen (Ruth Winona Tao), is pretty much an out-and-out lesbian, and homoerotic tones are front and center all through the "Sisterhood's" scenes -- especially Lyre's drugged brainwashing, which takes place in a nice, steamy hot tub. (Don't bother looking for the "director's cut," bubba. It doesn't exist.)

Kit, meanwhile is rescued from the cesspool by Yu-Yi (Christy Chung), a rebellious and spunky renegade from another clan who flouts tradition by wearing men's clothes and smoking incessantly. Once she nurses him back to health, they meet up again with Liu Hang and representatives of each of the Eight Clans, banding together to bring down the white-haired

witch. Notable among them is tough kung-fu Granny Yin, who becomes their nominal leader and mother figure.

Which, I suppose, is as good a place as any to point out one of the main flaws in this movie, compared to the original: Too damned much comic relief. The first one had lighter moments, sure, but still reserved and supportive of the lyrical atmosphere that maintains the movie. Here, we've got spunky Yu-Yi, knuckle-headed Liu Hang, tough-but-tender Granny Yin... It's a full complement of Stooges that keep the mood ever from approach the "dark fairytale" feel of the original.

On the other hand, without the comic relief characters, we've really got no characters of consequence. Again, contrasting to the original, in which Cho and Moonlight went through an arc of distrust openness, suspicion, betrayal, and penitent condemnation, our young lovers here start out loving each other, and Kit never changes. Lyre, having been brainwashed in the hot tub (yet another phrase I never thought I'd compose), is always screeching about how Kit only wanted her for raising an heir -- but since we all know she's been mindwarped, it's not like it's a real character transformation for her.

In an apparent effort to address this character inertia, there's a flashback sequence inserted from Kit and Lyre's courtship, where their correspondence was carried by heavily-anticipated carrier pigeons. Then there's a breakdown in communication, with each worrying that they've fallen out of favor with the other -- when in reality, the pigeon's been shot down and eaten by none other than Yu-Yi. In my most charitable mindset, I can see this whole episode as an attempt to show that there were still insecurities in the lovers' minds, which Moonlight and the Sisterhood could play off when they turned Lyre to the other team, so to speak -- but the cut between the pining lovers and the pigeon roasting on a spit just induces giggles.

The anti-witch squad attempt an assault on the Sisterhood's fortress, but naturally have their asses handed to them repeatedly, so naturally it's up to Cho to show up, deus ex machina-like, to save the day in the end. (After all, with Leslie Cheung's name so high in the credits, he's at least got to appear on screen for four minutes or so, right?)

It's not a bad movie per se, but it's completely unnecessary to the story of Cho and Moonlight. Lacking both the scope and the vision of the original, it never manages to do more than echo faintly the lyrical, bittersweet atmosphere that was *The Bride With White Hair's* true strength, and make you wish that you were watching it instead of this one. (by Nathan Shumate of Cold Fusion Video)

Burning Paradise (Hong Kong, 1994: Ringo Lam) - Ringo Lam's first (and so far, only) kung-fu movie seems to go unnoticed by fans. I don't even think it's available on DVD. That's too bad, as this film stands beside other, better-known kung-fu movies of the same era, such as *Iron Monkey* and the *Once Upon a Time in China* series. Basically, what Lam did was update the classic Shaw Brothers film, keeping intact a strong sense of gore and doom, while at the same time injecting some all around great martial arts into the mix. *Burning Paradise* looks and feels like something Chang Cheh would've helmed in the mid '70s, had he been provided with the budget.

One thing that ruined the film for many was that Willie Ho was hyped as the "next Jet Li." He isn't by a long shot, though he isn't that bad. [Yeung Sing] is a much better martial artist, and should've been the star of the movie, other than portraying the turncoat monk Hong. Carman Lee, as Tou-Tou, gives a good performance in what is your basic role as the screaming girl who

must always be rescued. Yet another tie to kung-fu movies of the past. And the actor portraying the villain of the piece, Elder Kung, goes way overboard as the demonistic ruler of the Temple. He uses blood to paint, and has the ability to not only fly, but fire specks of paint like projectiles from his brush.

Fong, his uncle, and Tou-Tou are accosted by a band of masked Chings and their leader, Crimson. This is the best part of the movie, as Fong takes on these guys in the middle of the desert. But Fong gets captured anyway, his uncle murdered by Crimson. From there, Fong and Tou-Tou are taken to the gothic Red Lotus Temple, where Elder Kung adds Tou-Tou to his stable of concubines, and puts Fong to work in the mines. Fong has a few run-ins with Hong, who serves as Kung's second-in-command, before it's revealed that Hong is only pretending to help Kung; he's really trying to figure out a map of the Temple, to lead his Shaolin brothers to freedom. Fong and Hong, of course, team up to take out Elder Kung and his henchmen in the end.

Did I mention the gore? This movie freaked out my wife, it was so gory. Elder Kung rips off heads, people get sliced and diced by bladed traps, and the corpses of monks lie scattered about the Temple in unusual positions. All of this stands to make *Burning Paradise* more of a horror film than a genuine kung-fu movie.

Of course, it goes without saying that despite this, there's still some comedy thrown into the mix, as is usual with modern-day HK movies; no matter the dark tone of a film, HK filmmakers of today will still find some way to add in goofy, Cantonese humor. The humor in *Burning Paradise* isn't as obtrusive as in some other HK flicks, but at times it does come off as too forced. A few moments are genuinely funny, though, like when Fong and an old monk pretend they're dead to fool the Chings, or when [Yeung Sing] screams out "Who squeezed my dick?" during the final battle.

The martial arts on display is mostly wire-free. Fong and Hong flip around like acrobats while engaging in furious hand and weapons-based combat. Willie Ho's portrayal of Fong is more hip than Jet Li's, what with his huge broadsword and kick-ass attitude. The costumes are excellent across the board, though they go for a more realistic look than the Shaw Brothers-style metal armbands. Set-wise, the Red Lotus Temple looks genuinely creepy, and you start to feel sorry for these damn monks as they stumble into one deadly trap after another.

Overall, a good, recent kung-fu movie. Not the best ever, but I'd still like to see more movies like this coming out of Hong Kong than the usual junk. (by Joe909 of City on Fire)

Butterfly and Sword (Hong Kong, 1993: Michael Mak) – aka *Comet*, *Butterfly and Sword*-*Butterfly and Sword*, though far from perfect, is still a great example of the wuxia pien at the height of the genre's evolution during the early '90s. It features top Hong Kong stars of the day both martially inclined - Michelle Yeoh and Donnie Yen - and not - Tony Leung and Joey Wong. But the real star is action director Tony Ching Siu-tung who turns everyone into a whirling dervish of silk arrow-slinging, body-rupturing, and tree-skimming masters of death.

Although the action is advanced, the story is classic wuxia material but presented with somewhat less skill. At its heart *Butterfly and Sword* is an angst-filled romance with the emotions of four martial heroes getting entwined. But you wouldn't know that from the action-packed opening. Meng Sing-wan (Tony Leung), Ko (Michelle Yeoh), and Yip Cheung (Donnie Yen) are childhood friends and sole members of the Happy Forest, a leading clan in

the martial world presently offering their services to Eunuch Li of the imperial court. After literally plowing through a caravan to assassinate one of Li's targets, they are next ordered to take out the leader of Elite's Villa, Suen Yuk-pak (Elivs Tsui). In order to infiltrate the clan, Sing-wan fakes his death and resurfaces as a traveling swordsman who gains the trust of Yuk-pak. Meanwhile, tension mounts among the Happy Forest members due to a complex love rectangle. Sing-wan has fallen in love with a woman named Butterfly (Joey Wong), yet Ko is in love with Sing-wan and Yip Keung is in love with Ko. In other words, no one's having a good time. As the ill-named Happy Forest crew close in on Yuk-pak, bigger problems surface when a plot to wipe out all of the clans is revealed.

Frankly, the story is a mess. The narrative runs as fast as the manic action editing and only slows down at the wrong times. There is too little time spent on developing our heroes' enemies and too much time spent on soap opera fluff between the quartet. The inclusion of childhood flashbacks crowds out other story elements that should have been explored more thoroughly in what is already a short running time. Contemporary gags such as a reference to 'Western' underwear appear here and there and are unnecessary and distracting. The synthesizer music that accompanies the film is no help either.

On the plus side, the wire fu action is phenomenal and features tight, stylized editing and endlessly creative choreography from Ching Siu-tung. Siu-tung is a pioneer in the complex editing style used for many modern martial arts films. Some of its early development can be seen in *Duel to the Death*, Siu-tung's directorial debut. The violence level is quite high without being excessively gory. It's great, excessive nonsense. Heads explode from kicks and Jimmy Lin's character performs an insane 'whirlwind kick' where he spins through the air upside down with legs extended. Highlights include the bamboo fight scene where Michelle Yeoh performs downward-sliding splits between bamboo stalks (not unlike what Siu-tung also gets Zhang Ziyi to do in *House of Flying Daggers*). The best stunt is where Michelle launches Tony Leung like an arrow literally through several enemies. Donnie Yen pulls out a few of his trademark moves, but apart from a terrific drunken sword display, he gets engulfed by the action excesses.

The art direction is excellent and the costumes are particularly impressive. With more attention paid to the script and music this could have been a brilliant film. Even so, the action is hot and the cast make the most of their roles. For extreme wuxia akin to *Kung Fu Cult Master* you'll have a hard time finding anything more entertaining than *Butterfly and Sword*.
(by Mark Pollard of Kung Fu Cinema)

Chinese Ghost Story, A (Hong Kong, 1987: Tony Ching Siu-Tung) - A young man staying the night at an abandoned monastery is seduced by a beautiful woman (Joey Wang). The woman shakes her anklet, ringing the tiny bells attached to it. A mysterious force races through the forest and into the monastery, and the young man screams in terror as it engulfs him.... Ling Choi-Sun (Leslie Cheung), a debt collector, is caught in a torrential downpour. When he arrives in the town where he is supposed to collect money owing, he finds to his dismay that his records have been ruined. Penniless, he asks one of the townspeople where he might find a free lodging for the night, and is told about the monastery. Choi-Sun thanks him, not noticing the horrified looks on the people nearby. As he walks from the town, a portrait of a beautiful woman catches his eye. At the monastery, Choi-Sun finds himself caught in the middle of a ferocious sword battle between an older, bearded man and his younger adversary. The Bearded One (Wu Ma) sends away his vanquished opponent, then warns Choi-Sun not to stay at the monastery. Choi-Sun ignores him. Meanwhile, while tending his wounds at a lake, the younger swordsman is astonished to see a beautiful woman bathing there. He responds to her

advances, only to be attacked by something that leaves him a withered husk. Choi-Sun hears singing from behind the monastery. Following the sound, he finds a waterside temple and a woman whom he recognises from the painting in town. Nearby, the Bearded One also hears the singing. At the temple, the woman deliberately throws her veil into the water and sends Choi-Sun in to get it. As she helps him out, she makes advances towards him that he shyly repulses. Suddenly, the Bearded One appears and the woman flees in alarm. Choi-Sun snatches up her musical instrument and follows her into the forest. She tells him that the swordsman will kill them both. Choi-Sun offers to distract the swordsman so that she can escape to safety. He then asks her name, and is told that she is Ip Siu-Sin. She hesitantly agrees to see him the next night. Choi-Sun succeeds in drawing the swordsman's attention, but puts himself in great danger. Siu-Sin intervenes to save him, and the Bearded One pursues her. As he is about to kill her, a Demon rises from the forest floor and sends a swiftly growing tree to intercept the Bearded One's hurled spike. Struck, the tree bursts into flames. The Demon tries to make a deal with the Bearded One, claiming they both work to destroy the worst human elements, but the Bearded One rejects the Demon angrily. Choi-Sun finds a note from Siu-Sin, telling him they must not meet again. Regardless, he visits her the next night. Terror-stricken, Siu-Sin hides him in her bath, telling him that if he stays underwater the Demon will not be able to smell his presence. The Demon produces the note Siu-Sin wrote to Choi-Sun, accusing her of betrayal, and whipping her for her disobedience. Siu-Sin is then told that her marriage has been arranged, and will take place in three days. When the Demon has gone, Siu-Sin tries to send Choi-Sun away, insulting him to make him go. Hurt by her words, he does. However, still smitten, Choi-Sun visits the man who painted Siu-Sin's portrait. He tells him that he saw the subject of the painting the previous night, and recoils with horrified disbelief when the artist replies that the woman has been dead for nearly a year....

An awe-inspiring mixture of horror, mystery, martial arts, romance and comedy, *A Chinese Ghost Story* set the standard for Hong Kong cinema for years to follow, and would make an excellent introduction point for any novice to this strange and wonderful branch of the cinematic world. Influenced by *The Evil Dead* as it undoubtedly was, the film effortlessly melds its disparate components into a highly original and visually startling entity (the IMDb lists an incredible seven cinematographers!). It is hard to imagine a Western film blending so many moods together, let alone doing it so successfully (perhaps *Buckaroo Banzai* is the closest point of comparison, and Lord knows that's an acquired taste). A gentler, funnier tale than many of its descendants, the film uses one of the more common Chinese legends, the love between a mortal man and a ghostly woman, as the springboard for some eye-popping special effects work. The story follows Choi-Sun, a hapless debt collector left stranded when his records are ruined, and his series of encounters with the lovely and mysterious Siu-Sin, a lost spirit in thrall to a Tree Demon of indeterminate sex. Forced against her will to seduce mortal men in order for the Demon to feed, Siu-Sin faces a dilemma when the shy and gentle Choi-Sun initially rejects the advances she makes towards him. Though charmed by Choi-Sun's respectful demeanor and concern for her, Siu-Sin knows full well what will happen to her should she spare his life. The scenes between Choi-Sun and Siu-Sin run the gamut from the romantic to the tragic to the comedic – and occasionally manage to be all these things at once. In one instance, in a scene that initially appears to have been lifted from a bedroom farce, Siu-Sin hides her human lover from the Demon by submerging him in her bathtub. At one point keeping Choi-Sun underwater with a literally breathtaking kiss, Siu-Sin completes the deception by stripping off her clothes and climbing into the bath on top of him. (Choi-Sun's expression at this point is priceless – we get the feeling that he couldn't breathe even if he were in a position to do so.) Choi-Sun and Siu-Sin do eventually indulge in some discreet love-making in the rain-swept temple, this beautiful and rather erotic scene being tinged with sadness for Siu-Sin and the viewer alike, both of whom understand what Choi-Sun does not:

that the relationship is not just impossible, but that its most likely outcome is eternal damnation for them both.

The final ingredient in this bizarre and entertaining scenario is the swordsman, who has chosen to live in isolation by the monastery. Initially an ambiguous character, whether he is a force for good or evil is not entirely clear until, in one of the film's most purely slapstick sequences, he shows himself at the County Administration Office, and is hailed as Mandarin Yim, whose "justice is renowned through twenty-six provinces". After a lifetime of fighting crime both secular and ghostly, and thoroughly disgusted with humanity and spirit world alike, Yim has retired to live a solitary life disturbed only by his ongoing battles with the demons of the woods, and the occasional younger swordsman who (just like in the westerns) wants to knock the champion off his perch. Yim is introduced, in fact, in the midst of an elaborate sword fight during which – in a mere taste of what's to come - he and his opponent leap and fly and bound from place to place as they wage their battle (the wire-work in this film is just amazing). Yim spends a fair amount of time heaping scorn and abuse upon Choi-Sun's head, in a futile attempt to convince him that the monastery is not a good place to stay. We see him next making a near-successful attempt on Siu-Sin's, ah, "life" (existence?). After this, the viewer is left uncertain as to whether the swordsman is friend or foe. But then follows perhaps the single most astonishing scene in the entire film (and believe me, that's saying something!), in which Yim, leaping from tree to tree and somersaulting through the air, launches without warning into what can only be described as a Taoist rap song, the lyrics informing the viewer that benevolent ways are best and that good will always defeat evil (hmm – don't hear that in too many rap songs....). Well-intentioned as the viewer now knows Yim to be, the awareness that he is a deadly threat to Siu-Sin remains. The threat does not recede until, forced to concede that in Choi-Sun and Siu-Sin he has met a thoroughly nice representative of each of the realms he so despises, Yim dedicates himself not just to causing them no more trouble, but to helping them both. Finally convinced of Siu-Sin's incorporeality, Choi-Sun has learnt that her desperate predicament was brought about through her being murdered. Her father, who buried her ashes in a temporary location, was also killed before he could move them. If her ashes are not buried in the soil of her home village before the anniversary of her death, Siu-Sin will be perpetually trapped in the spirit world, with no hope of ever reincarnating. Understanding that to help Siu-Sin will mean losing her forever, Choi-Sun nevertheless dedicates himself to finding her ashes and re-burying them in time to save her soul. It is for this task that Choi-Sun implores, and finally receives, Yim's help. But the situation becomes a deadly and terrifying one when Siu-Sin's controlling Demon decides to deliver her to her intended husband - a still more powerful Demon who lives in the underworld. Seeing Siu-Sin snatched away from them, Yim and Choi-Sun follow her to the very depths of hell, knowing that even if they can rescue her, they still must bury her ashes in time or see her damned for eternity.

Given this storyline, with its hoards of ghosts and demons, its random acts of violence, and the bittersweetness of its love story - indeed, the film's "happy" ending is a remarkably sad one - it is amazing to consider just how funny *A Chinese Ghost Story* is. Although full of scenes of horror, very few of them are played straight. The abandoned monastery, for instance, is inhabited by a hoard of living withered corpses, presumably earlier victims of Siu-Sin and her Demon. These corpses try, time and again, to drag Choi-Sun to his doom; a fate he manages to avoid without ever becoming aware of his undead companions' presence. (At one point, Choi-Sun lowers a ladder onto one of these unfortunate creatures; it squeals in pain and indignation.) Still funnier, and infinitely grosser, are the increasingly clear views granted of the hungry Demon at work. We do not, at first, know exactly what is happening: the scenes are shown POV (the clearest indication of the film's *Evil Dead* influence), with the victims screaming in terror as something attacks them. Finally, we learn the truth, as the Demon sends

forth an infinitely long tongue, which plunges down the throat of the doomed individual and sucks the very life-force from him (in one incredible scene, we get a tongue's-eye view of this procedure). As if this were not enough, the tongue is also used as a means of trapping Choi-Sun and Siu-Sin, wrapping itself around and around their refuge, then breaking in to attack Choi-Sun. Most disgusting still, yet another monster later breaks from within the tongue, baring its teeth and sending out elastic-like tendrils to grasp its intended victims. *A Chinese Ghost Story* also conjures up a sincerely frightening vision of hell, a nightmare world populated by ghosts and demons and monsters. Ruler of this realm is Siu-Sin's intended husband, who when threatened sends forth his personal army: a squadron of flying decapitated heads that attack Siu-Sin with their teeth as she struggles valiantly to defend her human friends. For all this, however, the most sincerely disturbing moment in *A Chinese Ghost Story* does not take place in hell. When attempting to recover Siu-Sin's ashes, Choi-Sun and Yim find a whole clutch of burial urns. Calling to their owners in an attempt to locate the right one, the pair find themselves confronted by a group of female spirits, all murdered, we understand, as Siu-Sin was, yet unlike her, with no hope of salvation. These sad, silent figures form the movie's most haunting image.

Although the special effects and action scenes are the real stars of *A Chinese Ghost Story*, the three principals each give wonderful, affecting performances. Leslie Cheung proved to be so good as playing the bumbling naïf that he practically made a career out of it. Joey Wang is indeed lovely and seductive as the ghost (although, amusingly, she turns out to be rather less insubstantial than you'd imagine: when Choi-Sun tries to pick Siu-Sin up at one point, he finds he can't manage it!). Wang's graceful and elegant Siu-Sin is a pleasure to watch, particularly as she manipulates her billowing robes, using them either as bait or as weapons; and she and Leslie Cheung make a sympathetic couple (and besides, he's nearly as pretty as she is). Wu Ma is simply marvellous as the Taoist swordsman, adding the necessary ballast to this ethereal tale. His gradual conversion from gruff loner to champion of humanity is believable, while his battle scenes are absolutely transfixing. *A Chinese Ghost Story* was a huge success, and to no-one's surprise two sequels followed, and later an animated version of the story was made by producer Tsui Hark. Of the first film's three stars, only Joey Wang appeared in both of the sequels, with Leslie Cheung and Wu Ma returning for the first of them. (by Lyz Kingsley of *And You Call Yourself a Scientist*)

Chinese Ghost Story 2, A (Hong Kong, 1990: Tony Ching Siu-Tung) - Mistaken for a wanted criminal, poor scholar Ling Choi-sun (Leslie Cheung) is thrown into jail. When his execution becomes imminent, he escapes with the assistance of his cellmate, who slips some of his own writings and a metal talisman amongst Choi-sun's possessions. Outside the prison, Choi-sun finds a horse waiting and rides away. The animal's owner, a monk named Chi-chau (Jackie Cheung), follows him by burrowing underground. Choi-sin shelters for the night in a deserted villa, wherein lie eight huge coffins. Chi-chau appears, and also decides to stay the night. When a hideous creature emerges from one of the coffins, Choi-Sun runs for his life. Out amongst the trees, a band of weird-looking, white-clad figures appears. Chi-chau grabs Choi-sun and flies him up into a tree, leaving him there while he battles the band with his magical powers. One of the attackers collides with Choi-sun, and he discovers to his astonishment that the mysterious figure is not only a beautiful woman, but that she is the image of his lost love, Siu-sin. Meanwhile, Chi-chau has discovered that the figures in white are not evil spirits, but human. Painting a mystical symbol on his palm, he freezes them. The woman then holds a knife to Choi-sun's throat, ordering Chi-chau to release her companions. At that moment, a second woman picks up Choi-Sun's belongings and, seeing the books and the talisman given to him in jail, exclaims that he is Master Chu-kwok. The first woman releases Choi-sun and introduces herself as Ching-fung (Joey Wong); her sister is Yuet-chi (Michelle Li). Their father, Fu Tin-chau,

is a former government minister, now under sentence of death, and they and their companions are attempting his rescue. Chi-chau releases the others from his spell. Hearing that they are in the presence of Master Chu-kuok, the entire band bows before Choi-sun and announces that they are his disciples, as Choi-sun tries in vain to convince them of his real identity. Still stunned by Ching-fung's appearance, Choi-sun tries to get her to admit being Siu-sin, showing her Siu-sin's portrait, and reading aloud the poem they wrote together. The others take the poem to be code and interpret it as a clue to Fu Tin-chau's whereabouts. By a coincidence, their guess proves correct, reinforcing "Chu-kuok"'s position. Ching-fung is smitten by Choi-sun. So too is Yuet-chi, who makes a snide reference to Ching-fung's fiancé. Meanwhile, Chi-chau senses evil spirits, and finds a huge claw-mark in the ground, and a mangled dead body nearby. Consulting Choi-sun, Chi-chau gives him his freezing power. However, Choi-sun accidentally freezes his companion. While he is trying to work out how to reverse the spell, a huge, hideous monster looms up behind Choi-sun, who runs away dragging the still-frozen Chi-chau. In the nick of time, Choi-sun freezes the monster. Unable to free Chi-chau without freeing the monster too, Choi-sun is helpless until his victims thaw. Chi-chau snatches Choi-sun from the monster and flies him to safety. He then fights the creature, finally slicing it in two. However, while Chi-chau manages to destroy the monster's legs, the upper half of its body gets away. He chases it by burrowing, but when he emerges he is almost run down by horsemen. Chi-chau and the General fight until they recognise their mutual misunderstanding. Impressed by his adversary, the General offers him a post working for the Emperor. Chi-chau rejects the offer with contempt and storms off, not realising that the General and his men are escorting Ching-fung and Yuet-chi's father to his execution.

Comments: Good: adj 1. morally excellent; righteous; pious. 2. satisfactory in quality, quantity, or degree; excellent.

Satisfactory in quality, quantity, or degree.... Ahhh....

It's been so many weeks since I reviewed a good film that I'd damn near forgotten what one looked like. But as I sat watching *A Chinese Ghost Story II*, all these strange emotions swept over me.... I'd saved it for last in my sequels binge, feeling the need for something that could wash the taste of *Friday The 13th Part 3* and *King Kong Lives* from my mouth; and it did the job nicely. That said, the film is a letdown when compared to its predecessor. *A Chinese Ghost Story* is such a frantic mixture of ghosts, demons, swordplay, martial arts, comedy and genuinely touching love scenes that any sequel would have been hard pressed to match it. This one doesn't really try. In fact, almost the first thing you notice about it is that there are, in fact, no ghosts anywhere in the film. Instead, most of its incidents are thoroughly corporeal, with only a large - though strangely uninteresting - monster and a much more satisfactory shape-shifting demon to liven up proceedings. (In fairness, I have a suspicion that no ghosts were actually promised by the Chinese title, but only by the English translation.) Genuine scare scenes are almost entirely lacking; while the air of poignancy generated in the first film by the doomed love affair between human and ghost is likewise absent. In their place, we have a distinct increase in the number of comedy scenes, many of which, for better or worse, are pure slapstick. Also considerably increased is the number of characters upon whom the story focuses. While each of them is, in his or her own right, quite interesting, we have nothing here to match the intensity of the first film's romantic relationship, nor the tension generated by the bringing together of the couple and the misanthropic, ghost-hunting swordsman, Yim. Although all of these factors make *A Chinese Ghost Story II* less of an experience than its forerunner, it must be pointed out that this film is intended very differently. *A Chinese Ghost Story* exists primarily to make its audience go "WOW!" – and it succeeds magnificently. This sequel, on the other hand, could almost be classified as political. Scattered throughout are bitter criticisms of a government that is unable or unwilling to understand the people it is

governing; of the damage caused by corruption; of widespread abuses of power. While the film is, of course, set in "the past", it is impossible to believe that the film-makers' criticisms were not aimed directly at the Chinese government of the time. Indeed, so blunt are many of the attacks made that it is surprising they got away with it; and perhaps the film's sharp increase in the number of outright comedy sequences was a way of deflecting attention from just what it had to say.

A Chinese Ghost Story II opens with a couple of macabre scenes that prove, as far as the film's overall tone is concerned, fairly misleading. Wandering back into town after his ghostly adventures, one time tax collector Lam Choi-sun partakes of a meal that proves to have been prepared from his own horse – or perhaps (as we are given a glimpse of an arm-toting dog straight out of Yojimbo) from something worse. Almost immediately, the film's main agenda kicks in, as Choi-sun is thrown into prison on the flimsiest of pretexts. There he meets another victim of the system, Chu-kwok, who blames all his problems on his parents' insistence that he become "a scholar". Attempting to make a living with his writing, Chu-kwok found everything he did construed as "subversive": his books on travel, history, strategy and myth were interpreted as revealing secrets, promoting dissent, inciting revolt and encouraging superstition, respectively. Finally turning to biography, Chu-kwok discovered that he had again chosen the wrong subject when he – and his subject – were condemned to life imprisonment. Choi-sun soon learns that the prison is a place of arbitrary execution; one where, if the son of "an official" is condemned to death, a handy substitute is found. Discovering that this fate awaits Choi-sun, Chu-kwok reveals an escape route from the prison; one which he uses to get his writings published, but does not otherwise feel inclined to exploit. Chu-kwok sends his young friend on his way with some copies of his books and a talismanic device on which his own name is engraved – objects which will set in motion the film's central comedy of misunderstanding.

Outside the prison, Choi-sun finds a horse waiting and rides off on it, not realising it belongs to Chi-chau, a monk with magical powers who wanders the countryside literally sniffing out ghosts and demons. Chi-chau pursues via the Bugs Bunny-like method of burrowing just below the surface of the earth. The two men meet up in the inevitable haunted villa, and after briefly mistaking one another for ghosts, settle in for the night. It is not long before the villa's original occupant, a huge, slimy demon, makes its presence felt, and Choi-sun flees for his life, only to end up in the hands of the white-clad warriors, one of whom is the image of his lost love, Siu-sin. *A Chinese Ghost Story II* tries, like its predecessor, to build itself upon a love story, but generally fails, chiefly because while some of its characters do, pretty much of necessity, "fall in love", none of them seems to care very much who they are "in love" with. Thus, Ching-fung falls for Choi-sun primarily because she believes him to be "the master", Chu-kwok; while Choi-sun responds because he thinks Ching-fung is the reincarnation of Siu-sin. Simultaneously, Yuet-chi also falls for "Chu-kwok" but then, accepting that he prefers her sister, instantly transfers her allegiance to Chi-chau. This careless pairing and re-pairing seriously diminishes the film's emotional impact.

More successful is the introduced subplot of Fu Tin-chau, a government minister arrested and scheduled for execution chiefly, we infer, because he is an honest politician. Unable to convince the band of warriors that he is not Chu-kwok ("Only the true Messiah denies his divinity!"), Choi-sun throws his lot in with them. Meanwhile, Chi-chau has discovered an ominous – and very large – footprint, and a mangled dead body. Believing, like the others, that Choi-sun is the font of all wisdom and enlightenment, Chi-chau consults him, and bestows upon him one of his magical powers, the ability to freeze via a symbol painted in the palm of the hand. This leads to one of the film's comedic highlights, an extended slapstick sequence that follows Choi-sun's accidental freezing of Chi-chau just as the demon shows itself.

Entertaining as this is, it again highlights a flaw in the film. The demons and monsters in *A Chinese Ghost Story* were genuinely scary and threatening; you felt that the characters were truly in danger from them. This creature, however, never seems much of a menace. In fact, the worst thing it does is to steal Joey Wong's clothing while she's in the bath – and I can't imagine there would be too many people out there willing to blame it for that. (A re-working of the original story's "bath scene", this sequence culminates in one of the film's funniest moments. Ching-fung reclaims her clothes, not realising that they are somewhat revealingly torn. In order to shield her from the others' sight, Choi-sun makes a "stirring" speech, announcing that for their cause to succeed, they must "throw out their chests and have no fear" – and throws his robes wide open as he speaks. The other men copy Choi-sun enthusiastically. Yuet-chi, on the other hand, looks extremely reluctant.) Chi-chau is eventually released from the spell and battles the demon, cleaving it in half at the waist. Its legs are destroyed, but the top half of its body manages to escape (!), and causes various amounts of mischief until eventually disposed of. Chi-chau does pursue this demi-demon, again burrowing beneath the ground, but emerges in the middle of a road and is almost run over by a troop of imperial soldiers. They are led by General Fu, who is – thematically at least – the film's pivotal character: an honest man in the service of a corrupt administration. The General and Chi-chau fight until recognising that they are at cross-purposes. Impressed with his adversary, the General offers him a position in the service of the Emperor, an offer Chi-chau rejects with scorn. He storms off, not realising that the General's convoy is transporting Fu Tin-chau to his execution. Chi-chau's reaction to the suggestion of government service, and the discomfort displayed by the General in his dealings with Fu Tin-chau, add further shadings to our concept of the government as the source of all evil.

As per Choi-sun's accidental prediction, the General and his men show up at the villa, just as Ching-fung's rebels are losing their battle with what remains of its inhabiting demon. A most welcome swordfight ensues between the two bands, resulting in the rescue of Fu Tin-chau. The General himself is suckered into fighting the demon ("Huh! A fake ghost! Take off that mask!") and eventually dismembers it – which makes it more dangerous than it was when "alive". It takes Chi-chau's magic finally to destroy the creature, but not before its bodily fluids have poisoned Ching-fung (allowing Joey Wong to do her best Linda Blair impersonation). Chi-chau concludes that in order to be cured, Ching-fung requires an input of "yang energy" – and he orders Choi-sun to kiss her back to normality. He does so, and briefly the film recaptures the heated romanticism of its predecessor. The General, recognising the purity of the rebels' motives, promises that he will try to help Fu Tin-chau. At that moment, a band of travelling monks comes nearby. The General explains that the one in the golden robes is High Priest to the Emperor, and has enormous influence with him. By this stage of the film, these words are sufficient to put the viewer on guard; and indeed, the High Priest turns out to be the story's true villain: a demon of deadly powers who has taken human form. Sending the General (who is still useful to it) away, the High Priest at first seems amenable to Fu Tin-chau's plea for "justice" – but his final response is to start a death chant, which lures several members of the band of rebels to their deaths. Chi-chau, however, recognises both the chant and that the High Priest is not what he seems. The monk attacks with his magical powers, forcing the demon to change form. It transforms itself into a huge golden Buddha, and momentarily halts its attacker by claiming to be the real Buddha. (The demon will take on this form several times during the remainder of the film, at length suggesting a Hong Kong version of the Stay-Puft Marshmallow Man.) This disguise does not fool Chi-chau for long, and he exerts all of his powers to allow his friends to escape. Choi-sun and Ching-fung succeed in doing so, but Yuet-chi, Fu Tin-chau and Chi-chau himself are captured. Hearing the sounds of a fight, the General hurries back, only to be confronted by the dumbfounding announcement that Fu Tin-chau has "confessed" to his crimes. Bewildered and downcast, the honest soldier still cannot bring himself to doubt the High Priest.

Meanwhile, Choi-sun and Ching-fung have narrowly avoided death both at the hands of a band of murderous thieves and from drowning. In between hairsbreadth escapes, Choi-sun manages to convince Ching-fung that he is not Chu-kwok, and she him that she is not Siu-sin. It seems that this new-found knowledge of one another will do the couple no good, however, when the thieves send a band of wolves to attack them. (This leads to one of my favourite moments when, seeing no escape, Choi-sun takes Ching-fung in his arms and says nobly, "Let me be on the outside, so the wolves eat me first!" "You're so good to me!" she responds in all seriousness.) The pair's flight through the woods has led them to a mysterious building, which to his delight Choi-sun discovers to be the Lan Yuek Monastery – the retreat of his old friend, Swordsman Yim. (While Yim's appearance in the film reeks of sequel contrivance, I can't imagine that anyone watching will be at all sorry to see the wonderful Wu Ma again.)

The film's defining scene follows. The High Priest retreats to a palace in the middle of nowhere, and we soon learn why: an eclipse of the moon forces the demon to break out of its human shell and resume its real form. Confused by the High Priest's behaviour, the General follows him into the palace. Inside is a huge auditorium, with government officials filling its seats. The General begins to explain events to them but, getting no response, investigates further. In the film's most audacious stroke, we learn that every single government official was a demon in disguise. They, too, have been forced into the open, leaving only a bloody human shell behind. Finally understanding, the General shrieks in horror, "Where have you put the officials' souls?" He then decides to battle the High Priest, but finds his body likewise discarded. Following a slime trail leading from the human disguise, the General locates his captive friends, each encased in a red silk cocoon. He frees them, and finds himself under attack from Fu Tin-chau, who accuses him of treachery, and Chi-chau, furious at being dragged into "state affairs". The General explains, and the reluctant Chi-chau agrees to join forces with him. The partnership is doomed, however: first the High Priest's minions attack, and then High Priest himself, back in human form, recommences his death chant. The General, unable to forgive himself for having been the dupe of evil, flies into battle, only to meet a gruesome demise similar to that of The Black Knight in *Monty Python And The Holy Grail* – only here it isn't played for laughs. All seems lost until the sudden appearance of Yim, whose superior powers put the High Priest to flight. Recognising that this is only a temporary respite, Yim draws a magic protective circle about the band of friends, asking them all to chant with him. Interestingly, although the film as a whole has corrupt government as the target of its criticism, here it takes a swipe at religious factionalism, too. When Chi-chau objects to the notion of chanting with, "I'm a member of the Kun Lun Sect", Yim responds furiously, "Don't talk of sects at such a time! Let's fight it together!"

And fight "it" together they must – "it" being the demon in its true form, that of a gigantic centipede. This spectacular battle climaxes with Yim and Chi-chau trapped, Jonah-like, in the belly of the hideous creature; a situation where escaping proves to be as dangerous as staying put. For a time *A Chinese Ghost Story II* seems to be heading, appropriately enough, for the kind of bittersweet ending that made the first film so memorable and moving, but then something horrible happens: we get a tacked on happy ending. And I don't just mean "tacked on" in a general sense; I mean Hollywood tacked on! Contrived and unconvincing in the extreme, the final scenes leave the viewer with a distinct feeling of disappointment; and probably thinking less kindly of the film than, on the whole, it deserves.

Film reviewers are an illogical bunch, and Lord knows, I'm no exception. After complaining incessantly about film sequels that are nothing more than carbon-copies of the originals, here I get one that tries to do something very different from its predecessor – and of course, I complain about that, too. Ah, well.... *A Chinese Ghost Story II* is chock-full of good intentions.

Interestingly, not only is it stringently critical of corrupt government, it also points the finger at the apathy of the people – an attitude, it is inferred, that has a lot to do with evil forces seizing power in the first place. This argument becomes most apparent once Yim re-enters the proceedings. He, like Chi-chau, isn't interested in "teaming up": he'll fight, but only on his own terms. That such individualistic behaviour cannot succeed in times of crisis, that good people must not only be willing to take action, but to band together, is made abundantly clear over the final third of the film, where most individualistic actions end in disaster. Still, well-meaning as it is, this film simply never has the impact of the original. This is not only true in visual terms, but on the level of character: the story tends to jump around too much, never really deciding who it is truly about. This is perhaps best illustrated by the sidelining of the original story's two stars. Joey Wong makes considerably less of an impression here, as much through her character's inconsistencies as through her corporeality; while Leslie Cheung's Choi-sun is also a much more peripheral character than in the original. It is the story's three warriors, spiritual and physical, to whom the film belongs. Jackie Cheung can often be an annoying actor, but he's good as Chi-chau, a role which allows him to be both funny and heroic. Wu Ma is Wu Ma – enough said? As indicated, Yim's presence isn't really necessary to the story, but it's so good to have him back that it hardly matters. The film's acting honours, however, go to Waise Lee Chi-Hung as the General. It is this upright man's inner conflict, and his horrified discovery that his attempts to act with honour have led to nothing but injustice and misery, that give the film its deepest meaning. For the rest of it, *A Chinese Ghost Story II* shares many of the original's virtues: cinematography, production design and special effects are all wonderfully memorable. It may be both less moving and less frightening than the first film – and more comedic – but this is still a hugely entertaining film, and another reminder of just how much fun Hong Kong cinema at its best can be. (by Lyz Kingsley of And You Call Yourself a Scientist)

Chinese Ghost Story 3, A (Hong Kong, 1991: Tony Ching Siu-Tung) - After the ambitious, but flawed second installment in the *Chinese Ghost Story* series, the final part plays it safe and reworks the plot of the original film. Gone is Leslie Cheung (bar an opening recap), but Tony Leung's naive Fong is from the same mould and shares a similar romance with the ghostly Wong, whose Lotus is a harder-edged version of Sian from the first film. Fong is under the reluctant tutelage of an elder priest and must convince the priest to spare his spectral lover and save her ashes, just as Cheung had to.

Yet *A Chinese Ghost Story III* has one big surprise; it's first-rate entertainment. Returning to the original premise may be lazy, but in its vitality, wit and emotion the movie is a standalone success.

Part III is, unsurprisingly, the darkest entry in the series as writers Tsui and Szeto had previously collaborated on *We're Going to Eat You* (1980). A swimming pool orgy with moronic bandits is curtailed as Lotus, Butterfly and the Tree Demon bloodily tear the men's souls from their bodies. Thankfully absent are the rubber monsters of *A Chinese Ghost Story II*, here the ghosts are back and the horrors are recognizably physical; Lotus uses her long hair to drag her victims to the doom, an image Ronny Yu seems to have borrowed for *The Bride with White Hair* (1993), Butterfly's claw-like red nails rip befuddled men apart and the Tree Demon, a powerful asexual priestess, again has a snaking tongue that captures his/her prey. In the nearby town, weapons manufacturing is the lone growth industry and Yin thinks nothing of dismembering irksome bandits.

One of the film's triumphs is that it marries this darker worldview with lighter, more playful elements. The middle section resembles a Hollywood screwball comedy refracted through a Hong Kong lens, as Lotus attempts to seduce the celibate Fong in the Orchid Temple. Wong

riffs on her performance in the original movie, and is more playful in this role, her clothes bursting into flames from the heat of her passion, forcing the chaste Fong to disrobe her as she returns the favor. Wong gives her best performance in the series demonstrating a sassy flirtatiousness, while the likeable Leung is bumbling and winning enough to plausibly draw her back from the dark side. Playfully, Lau Shun and Lau Siu-ming, respectively evil and good characters in *A Chinese Ghost Story II*, switch sides for this movie, Lau Siu-ming reprising his demonic role from the first film.

The wirework action is a delight; with director Ching joined by three action directors. The flying sequences are so gracefully agile why didn't Hollywood call for the wirework wonderboys until almost a decade later? While martial arts is limited to Yin's swordplay abilities, the powerful monks and evil ghosts frequently battle above the ground with incantations and exploding charms, and Yin (who may or may not be the Taoist ghostbuster from the second movie) also has a ghost-seeking sword cannon that he uses to bother the dangerous Butterfly, played with full-blooded lethality by Nina Li (that's Mrs. Jet Li, trivia fans).

The climax with an all-powerful Mountain Demon bearing down on the protagonists reveals again how much inventive mythology Hong Kong movies have to draw from. The sifu uses his own gold blood (the mark of a true Zen master) to paint Fong, making him a living embodiment of the gold Buddha statue required to defeat powerful demons.

Ching's visual storytelling is more assured here than in part two, and sticks to the visual pattern used in the previous installments, harsh daytime lighting for the town scenes and a chilly, erotic blue for the Orchid Temple, but extends his visual palette to burnished gold for the Tree Demon's lair. Ching (joined by regular DP Lau Moon-tong) also reaffirms his credentials as the comic-book poet of Hong Kong with *Evil Dead* demon POV shots and haunted forests, and tongue POV shots as the demons give their victims the ultimate French kiss!

Allegory is not a primary concern for the filmmakers this time around, but there is thematic meat on the bone. The spectral sisters are Lotus, an African plant fabled to make those who eat it lose any desire to return to normal life, and Butterfly, an insect once believed to be a disguised larcenous witch.

During the climactic chase when the Mountain Demon reveals himself, he drags the town behind him, resembling an unstoppable freight train. Coupled with Fong's sifu's teachings on materialism, maybe the suggestion is the march of progress inevitably leads to avarice and murder. (by Rob Daniel of Kung Fu Cinema)

Chinese Legend, A (Hong Kong, 1991: Lau Hung-Chuen) - Low-budget rip-off of *A Chinese Ghost Story*, with Jackie Cheung playing a composite of his and Leslie Cheung's characters from the aforementioned series, and the Joey Wang ghost character being broken into two: Joey Wang as the forever sad ghost and Sharla Cheung Man as a fox goblin who seduces men to their doom. Wu Ma plays the same character he did in the other movies. Storywise, this film is even more ambitious than *A Chinese Ghost Story I* and *III*, as it goes into the backstory of how Joey Wang's character becomes a ghost, and has a subplot of the characters travelling in time to prevent her death in the first place. There's lots of flying people, flowing fabrics used as weapons and some decent balletic swordplay on display, courtesy of Lam Moon Wah (*King of the Sea* and *Hero of Swallow*). The movie tends to drag, though, in between those sequences. Director Lau Hung-Chuen frequently worked alongside Ching Siu-Tung as cinematographer, but lacks the budget to create some more distinctive set pieces and Ching's general visual style.

Not bad on the whole, though. (by Blake Matthews)

Chinese Odyssey: Pandora's Box, A (Hong Kong, 1995: Jeff Lau) - Having not completed his *Journey to the West* to bring Buddhist scriptures back to China, the Monkey King angers the Goddess for desiring to eat his master in order to gain immortality and is destroyed, but not before The Longevity Monk (Law Kar-ying) sacrifices himself so that he and Monkey may be reincarnated on earth. 500 years later, several devils converge on the spot where the monk is expected to be, all hoping to gain immortality from eating his flesh. Thus begins a new adventure as a bandit leader named Joker slowly discovers that he is the Monkey King while getting entangled in the exploits of two beautiful, shape-shifting devils.

Hong Kong fantasy martial arts films are generally known for their creativity and outrageous action, but *A Chinese Odyssey Part 1* and its sequel, *A Chinese Odyssey Part 2* rank as one of the most ambitious and brilliant undertakings in the region's history. First, the filmmakers began with a tried and true premise. They took the characters from author Wu Cheng-en's masterpiece of Chinese literature, *Journey to the West*, and created a new adventure loosely based on the book's final portion. Stephen Chow is cast as a reincarnated Monkey King, a role well-suited for his brand of nonsensical comedy. Add to this the magical wire-fu expertise of Tony Ching Siu-tung, wildly impressive production standards, and several gut-busting, hilarious scenes. The combined weight of so many great elements creates a film giant of monstrously entertaining proportions.

Both parts of *A Chinese Odyssey* basically comprise a single film and were either split in two when it became clear that the running time would go far beyond the desired 90 minutes that theaters preferred or it was planned that way. The first half begins in the realm of the gods as Monkey is confronted by Goddess for wanting to eat his master, The Longevity Monk, in order to gain immortality. They were both supposed to journey to India to retrieve Buddhist scriptures, but never quite made it. Monkey is effectively destroyed, but the kind monk intercedes upon his behalf by sacrificing himself and both of them are allowed to be reborn on earth. 500 years later, the gods have arranged for the monk and Monkey to meet on Earth to resume their journey. Two demon sisters who hope to eat the monk's flesh arrive at the intended spot which is a bandit hideout. The bandit leader is a cross-eyed and uni-browed goon named Joker (Stephen Chow) who shortly has his bad looks 'cured,' but gets into all sorts of trouble with the devil women when it is thought that he may be the reincarnated Monkey King who knows the whereabouts of the monk.

The lovely Karen Mok (*The God of Cookery*) plays Pak Jing-jing, a demon who loved the original Monkey King, but had her heart broken. She also turns into a bloodthirsty zombie when the moon is full. The other devil is Madam 30th (Yammie Nam), AKA the 'Spider Woman' who transforms into a giant arachnid that terrorizes the bandits. She makes Joker's second-in-command (Ng Man-tat) become her secret spy. The film's director plays an immortal monk who transforms into grapes (yes, grapes) and attempts to aid the bandits in fighting the devils. But everyone is forced to scatter when Monkey's old pal King Bull, a giant demon with a bull's head, comes looking for the monk himself. After a short fight, the sisters retreat to their lair. Jing-jing is poisoned by her sister in a tussle and attempts to kill herself as Joker races to save her. King Bull finds the lair and his battle with Madam 30th resumes. The end of part one is a cliffhanger that leaves Joker hundreds of years back in time and the apparent slave of another immortal.

If the previous plot breakdown is leaving you befuddled, don't let it keep you away from the film. Admittedly, *A Chinese Odyssey* hits the ground running right in the middle of events and doesn't bother to give any helpful back story. Like all of Chow's films, the dialogue speeds along and trying to follow subtitles that do not always translate well is a challenge. But a little patience initially pays off in the long run. The incredible pageantry of pre-CGI fantasy imagery, wire-fu action, colorful characters, and comedy bits will keep you entertained even when the ever-changing plot is difficult to follow.

As a fantasy, the film is outstanding. The effects and art direction, from giant spiders and bulls to creepy lairs and even a microscopic battle inside King Bull's body are unbelievable. One of Hong Kong's greatest cinematographers who ranks with Peter Pau and Christopher Doyle is Poon Hang-sang, whose previous work includes such notable films as *Center Stage* and *A Chinese Ghost Story*. He frames *A Chinese Odyssey* in rich colors and very dynamic and polished shots. While the visuals are excellent, the score is disappointing. Chiu Kwai-ping constantly reuses a rousing orchestral piece that doesn't quite fit the film. It is better than the usual synthesizer scores, but still sounds like stock music.

Tony Ching's expert action choreography is put to great use on several occasions, especially when the sisters battle the bandits and later when Yammie battles King Bull with twin swords. But the fighting only makes up a part of the film's appeal. Chow is up to his usual tricks and anyone who enjoys his style of humor will enjoy the hysterical, burning crotch-kicking scenes. Just when you think it is all over, it starts right up again. One of the funniest routines is saved for the end and uses repetition, again. Chow uses the Pandora's Box from the title to go back in time in order to save Karen Mok. But he keeps showing up too late. His interplay with an increasingly confused Ng Man-tat on each try gets better and better.

A Chinese Odyssey is nearly the perfect Stephen Chow film. Only poor music and a plot to challenge the uninitiated stand in the way. But there is just so much to see and experience with this ultra-creative and epic effort. Anyone looking for a slightly more faithful film adaptation of [Journey to the West](#) should consider Shaw Brothers' four-part series beginning with *The Monkey Goes West* (1966). (by Mark Pollard of Kung Fu Cinema)

Chinese Odyssey: Cinderella, A (Hong Kong, 1995: Jeff Lau) - Having been transported 500 years into the past by the magical Pandora's Box, Joker (Stephen Chow) becomes romantically entangled with an immortal transformed from a candlewick, reunites with his former master, and triumphantly transforms back into his original form as the Monkey King in order to do battle with the devil King Bull, save his friends, and continue his journey to the West.

This film is a continuation of an epic retelling of the novel [Journey to the West](#) that began with *A Chinese Odyssey Part 1 - Pandora's Box*. Though released as a sequel, both parts basically comprise one long film. This second half is every bit as visually stunning, humorous, and exciting as the first half. It is a well-rounded and wildly imaginative fantasy adventure full of wonderful characters and elaborate wire-fu action.

In the previous chapter, Joker had repeatedly used the Pandora's Box to travel back in time a short distance in order to save his love, the beautiful devil Pak Jing-jing (Karen Mok). He finally succeeded, but was shortly thereafter thrust back in time 500 years.

Now he meets up with an immortal transformed from a candlewick into a beautiful woman named Lin Zixia (Athena Chu). She claims the Pandora's Box and quickly falls in love with Joker,

but he's put off by her dual personality. Lin's gruff sister Qingxia also inhabits the same body and awakes at night. Lin wanders off at one point and Joker stumbles upon himself, or rather his previous self as the Monkey King. The scene that opened the first half of this story plays out fully as Joker watches the Monkey King defy the Goddess, resulting in his demise. But Joker's bumbling attempt to steal the Pandora's Box that Monkey drops changes history when it causes The Longevity Monk (Law Kar-wing) to vanish out of time before he can sacrifice himself. The monk returns to join Joker on a series of adventures involving Old Black Mountain Devil, a vampire-like monster who drains people's life force and King Bull, Monkey's devilish 'bro' who captures the monk and intends to eat him.

Confusion abounds as Joker meets up with Pigsy and his companion who plot to release their master, the Longevity Monk. Joker also encounters Lin who is being forced to marry King Bull, King Bull's wife who really loves Joker, and King Bull's sister who is supposed to marry Joker. A battle erupts on all sides that leaves Joker in the care of three thieves and everyone else prisoners of King Bull. After briefly reuniting with Jing-jing, Joker finally accepts his fate to become the Monkey King again, become a devout Buddhist, and complete his original task of traveling to India to retrieve Buddhist scriptures. But first, the reborn Monkey King must release his friends and fight King Bull in an epic battle.

Yes, this film gets a bit mired in numerous character interactions and sub-plots, but it doesn't diminish the enjoyment factor. Rather, there is a textured richness to the film's telling that rivals that of classic Chinese literature. This second half of the story builds on the first and presents new layers that continue to emerge right up to the end. It is also rare for a film this ambitious to end with such satisfying results.

The story takes on a more serious and reflective tone in its final moments, but scattered throughout **Part 2** are wonderfully shot comedy and action scenes that keeps the viewer glued to the screen even when it is difficult to see where the story is going. Actually, the surprise factor is part of what makes this feature such a delight. A scene where Law Kar-ying breaks out into song while imprisoned rivals the singing duet in *Shaolin Soccer* for unbridled hilarity. There are a couple of other hugely funny moments, but much of the humor creeps up quietly. To compliment this anything goes motif, Tony Ching delivers some of the best wire-fu yet conceived of. Combined with awesome imagery, the film looks incredibly fresh and inviting from start to finish. The only regrettable flaw is the noticeable appearance of wires in several scenes. Had the film come out a few years later, doubtless computers would have been used to erase them.

There is very little to complain about on *A Chinese Odyssey* and so much to praise. There is almost too much going on throughout the film, but I choose to consider it a selling point. Stephen Chow keeps the viewer grounded by transcending his onscreen persona that usually dominates all of his films and delivering a character with depth, who grows and changes throughout the story. There are so many ways in which a film based upon such a robust Chinese legend could have gone wrong, but Jeff Lau and his team pull it off magnificently. This is one of the last great Hong Kong films prior to their 1997 handover to China. (by Mark Pollard)

Chinese Torture Chamber Story, A (Hong Kong, 1994: Bosco Lam) - For some reason I couldn't help but picture Sgt. Joe Friday at the scene of the crime:

"Just the facts Ma'am. You say your husband's penis exploded. Has this ever happened before? Where were you at the time? On top of him? And the blood on your face would be from his exploding penis I suppose. I think you better come down to the station to give a statement and to have your bottom whipped and your fingernails pulled off."

One might think that a film that begins with an exploding penis and a pouty innocent face covered with gushing blood would have nowhere to go but down, but that's just the beginning of the bizarre happenings that occur in this ribald tale that alternates between low comedy and high torture like an S&M session of pain and pleasure. One could suffer pangs of vertigo, as one has to digest fast moving images of flying sex, intriguing sex toys, detached testicles, breast crushing machines, forced virgin dildo deflowering, rolling nude on a bed of nails and the limpid beautiful eyes of Yvonne Yung Hung. Producer Wong Jing gleefully takes out all the stops of taste and good décor in this Cat. III film that revels in its smirking debauchery.

In a series of flashbacks that come at the prodding of various implements of fiendish torture, Little Cabbage (Yvonne) relates what brought her to this sorry state. The scholarly and well-respected Lawrence Ng spots her tiny feet one day and immediately brings her and her feet into his household as a servant with the intention of one day making her his consort. His wife (Ching Mai) spends much of her time diddling with various sex toys ("the 4 lustful instruments") such as the ever-popular lustful bells ("it will stimulate your tits") or the more adventurous Mr. Horn that expands in water and is the perfect companion piece with the stimulating Hair Circle. These can all be purchased as a package on the Home Shopping Network for the low low price of \$29.99 for a limited time. Tell them I sent you.

When the husband is out of town the wife also brings a lover into her sexual games and the very curious Little Cabbage is discovered peeping on them. This leads the wife to arranging Little Cabbage's marriage to Tommy Wong who makes up for his poor status with a penis that is compared to a horse by the snorting Yuen King Tan. Knowing that his size will likely kill Little Cabbage, the two plotters feel safe, but Tommy abstains from hurting his wife and decides instead to take matters into his own hands. To the tune of *Unchained Melody* and a parody of *Ghost*, Little Cabbage does some non-pottery molding of her own with spectacular results.

All seems fine until the fateful day in which a mysterious aphrodisiac is ingested by Tommy and the combination of desperate desire and stimulants causes his penis to take off on a one-way journey to the moon. Both Little Cabbage and Ng are charged for plotting his murder and the corrupt magistrate (Lo Hung) has every intention of getting a confession out of them no matter how cruel he needs to get. These periodic scenes of torture are not necessarily for the squeamish, but at the same time it is kind of difficult to take them very seriously because of the overall ludicrousness and downright silliness of the film. Only the vile deflowering by the female guard (Liu Fan) seemed to be truly gratuitous and misogynistic with zero entertainment value. On the other hand those detached testicles were kind of amusing!

Ok – enough about plot and character development the reader is no doubt saying – tell me about the flying sex. Certainly one of the more famous and talked about scenes in HK film and to be copied a year later in a less inspired scene in *Eternal Evil of Asia* with one of the same participants (Julie Lee) – the queen of the flying sex act. In its own odd way this is simply a spectacular, humorous and delightful ode to the joys of sex and the bliss of a contented marriage. Picture Wong Jing having Chow Yun Fat and Zhang Ziyi flying through the trees in *Crouching Tiger* when all of a sudden Zhang rips off her blouse and challenges Chow to a sexual duel that he happily accepts ("wait till you hold this Green Destiny in your hands"). Well maybe not Chow and Ziyi – but how about the King of Cat. III Elvis Tsui and Julie Lee – famous for her

on and offscreen sexual shenanigans. These sexual kung fu masters take each other on in a battle to the climax – first Tsui attacks with his Invincible Mouth that makes her squirm in his powerful grasp. She counters with an upside-down Oral Attack that momentarily paralyzes him, until he meets her in a mid-air crash and moves behind her for an assault from the rear. Unlike many fights, this one is all give and take, but eventually Tsui's spinning Invincible Wheel move combined with the Turning Screw brings the duel to a satisfying end for both parties. I recommend that men do not allow their partners to see this scene or they may find themselves being asked to attempt some rather precarious positions at home and likely to be found wanting. (by Brian of View from the Brooklyn Bridge)

Chinese Torture Chamber Story II, A (Hong Kong, 1998: Dick Cho) - Why is Wong Jing my favorite HK producer/director/writer? Besides being one of the most prolific filmmakers working anywhere in the world, he is always able to put compelling visuals with interesting stories up on the big screen.

He has done it for me again with 1998's *A Chinese Torture Chamber Story II* which I saw at the Music Palace in NYC on 3/25/99. This movie features some very attractive actresses, a little martial arts, and some wildly extreme sexual situations, all cleverly written and beautifully photographed.

The film starts off slowly with Wong Chung and his sister and their friend Cheung Man-cheong as they attempt to rob Ma Sing-yee while he baths in the river. Kung Fu master Ma, on his way to the city to become a general for the Emperor, admonishes the trio and a bond is formed. Wong brings Ma back to his home where his nymphomaniac wife has prepared a meal. They have sex while Cheung gets drunk and passes out. Ma secretly lusts for Wong's sister, the sexy and demure Lotus. She is played by beautiful Yen Cho Sin quite effectively. The catch in the story, at this point, is that she is Cheung's fiancée. Though Cheung has disappointed Lotus as a lover she remains faithful when Ma makes his desires known.

All this is pretty normal stuff so far, right? Sexy simulated straight sex, some T and A, lusty performances but, you know, kind of boring. Then, all of a sudden, Wong Jing cranks it up a few notches.

Ma goes off to the city and has success as a government official. When Wong and Cheung join him at his palace, Ma makes good on his promise to make them his chief assistants. As Ma 'shows them the ropes', if you get my meaning, the two country boys find themselves in deep trouble. The treacherous Ma has a horrible secret that drives him insane as he has his eyes set on the virtuous Lotus.

Once the 2 couples hook up with Ma in his palace, the visuals become more compelling. The swordplay in the film features lots of severed limbs and heads. Scenes with torture feature molten wax being poured into ears and tongues being ripped out by hand held hooks. Cannibalism is featured in a scene with a villain who cuts out the heart of a captured soldier and eats it raw. Another captive is beaten to a pulp, then given oral sex by 2 women to force an erection, which is then whacked with a club by his tormentors. Sick.

The simulated sex scenes in this portion of the film, although photographed in a most compelling visual style, feature more deviant behaviour. Oral sex and anal sex, homo- and hetero-, are shown, some in flashback scenes to Ma's troubled youth.

If you look hard enough, I think you can find some post-Handover subtexts woven into the cleverly written script. Although credited to 'Dick', the writing is very 'Wong Jing'. Credited director Cho Kin Nam was bashed in a recent poll as one of the worst directors in HK for his work on *Chinese Erotic Ghost Story*[1998], also a Wong Jing production. I guess he's improved, but I'm sure Wong worked closely with him on *Torture Chamber 2*. (by J.Crawford at HKMDB)

Circus Kid (Hong Kong, 1994: Wu Ma) - A circus troop gets implicated with some opium smuggling and join with the local authority to stop it.

Much like the situation I was in with *Don't Give a Damn*, I've owned this VCD for so long and finally get to review it. Biao plays a circus performer, and Donnie is an officer. It's a nice movie I think, the settings are very cool. It almost feels like *Drunken Master 2*. And it's a different kind of movie overall at the same time.

The film starts out showing some circus performers in a tent. Biao is one of them and enters with some good acrobatics and (if it's him) he does a really cool move where he holds onto two straps hanging down, one on each arm, and rolls himself up towards the ceiling. The others do the same. After that there's a stunt where a guy is on a swing and gets swung way up into the air and is caught by the trapeze artists. We see some other stuff like a girl with awesome balance (she holds 5 candelabras on her body all over as she moves around), a few kids who fit into tiny tubes, and again Biao doing a thing where he climbs a pole while keeping a straight body, arms out, and spinning around it. Incredible, and I hear it was he who did it too.

There's a small fight with a girl inside a store which is small but I like Yuen Biao's punches, even though he only does like 6.

Biao breaks into a jail house thinking his uncle is in there but gets stopped by Donnie Yen. It's a decent fight going up some stairs. Biao does some good kicking and so does Donnie, some good handwork in the beginning too, and there's a lot of wirework BS but it's used only to take Biao upward. Donnie has none on him of course, he seems to glide wherever he goes. The camerawork is excellent, though there are a lot of cuts. Whenever more than 3 hits go, then it's another angle. But like I said the angles are well done, some of them through the balcony columns.

There's a fight on a boat where everyone gets involved (except Ken Lo). Biao fights against the female opponent who is quite good with hand to hand work (you'd be surprised), has some brief exchanges with her, and does some good acrobatics (if it's even him, I have my doubts) here and there. Donnie beats up people left and right and sadly doesn't get anything too interesting, which is almost sacrilegious because his presence in this movie almost demands that he have some kind of intense fighting, but there's nothing really. Just standard kicking and punching at bad guys. In fact there's nothing spectacular about this fight anyways. Some good camerawork again, but bad editing, too many cuts.

The finale is a mix between massacre and decency. To start with, forget about anyone except Donnie, Biao, and Ken Lo. Nobody else can fight in this scene. Donnie fights Bey Logan and it is painfully slow. Donnie of course is stylish to the max and does whatever he can to make the fight look impressive and puts out some great looking chain kicks, which are usually interrupted by terrible editing once more. Bey is doubled sometimes so poorly that they shot from above and you can see this HUGE mess of a wig that they put on the stuntman. I mean come on, at least TRY. It even looked like Donnie was doubled at times, which may have been

due to footage that they wanted to add later and just got someone else to do it, or maybe Donnie just couldn't do it. Who knows.

Biao and Ken Lo have some good exchanges when it's just regular kickboxing. Ken Lo is fast, so is Biao. Their small scene next to a table is the highlight of the fight. The editing again is super choppy, but it's well filmed nonetheless. There's one part where in one cut Ken breaks through a table, and then immediately after he's doing punches with Biao a good 10 feet away from that same table. That's awful. Ken does chain kicks but they have him do the same exact 3 kicks 4 times in a row from different angles and expect viewers to just take it as good fighting. Biao pulls out some elastic cords with steel balls on the ends from his sleeves and uses those to beat Ken Lo in a terribly wired finish to their brawl. Ken obviously has the upper hand but loses because he accidentally falls in a fire.

Something I can tell about this movie is that the good scenes were filmed in a way where you could see where the people were in relation to the environment. The fighting may have only been so-so, but the viewer had an idea of what was happening and where. The fight in the jail is the best one in the movie because you know EXACTLY where Biao and Donnie are, they're on stairs going upward. Easy. But in the finale, you might know where Donnie is fighting, but where the HELL are Biao and Ken Lo? There's never one shot of the scenery to give us a hint. So, this leads to some confusion and detracts from the value of the whole thing. Compare this to the last fight of *Drunken Master 2*. In that one, Jackie and Ken Lo start on a wooden rise and go down, and then go all the way down a corridor, and it's easy to see that. In this, they are sparratic and appear in weird places. One scene you see the table, and then it's gone with some totally different background, all within 2 seconds. A small lesson in angle choosing.

So, I was mildly impressed with this. The scenery was good except not shot properly in the finale, and the fighting was good whenever it was nice and thick but it wasn't always that way. There's just not a whole lot of good action in this, and the best you'll get out of it I think is the prison fight and the short bursts of kickboxing between Biao and Ken Lo at the end, plus Donnie looks cool. That's about it. I would give this a 3 had the finale had more good fighting with Ken, but I don't wanna give it a 2 because there were enough moments for me to enjoy. (by Eric Jacobus of the Stunt People)

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

Deadend of Besiegers (Hong Kong/PRC, 1992: Cheung Sing-Yim) - There were quite a few Hong Kong / Mainland China co-productions that came out of the 80's and 90's, and all of them tend to be top notch entertainment when it comes to kung-fu action. Yu Rong-Guang starred in the fantastic *Mirage*, and here he also gets to take on a lead role and action choreography duties for a movie directed by Cheung Sing-Yim. Sing-Yim is the man behind many Mainland productions that became popular in the west, from the first 2 'Shaolin Temple' movies with Jet Li to *Yellow River Fighter* with Yu Cheung-Hui.

As a disgraced Japanese martial arts master (due to losing a match with Dale 'Apollo' Cook, in an excellent fight told in flashback), Rong-Guang takes the advice of a Shaolin monk residing in Japan, and heads to China with a mission to learn Chinese martial arts. Hitching a lift with a gang of villainous pirates, once on Chinese shores he's understandably treated for a pirate whenever he opens his mouth and speaks Japanese. However, thanks to befriending a young girl, he soon finds himself stuck between prospective bride and groom Cynthia Khan, and a guy who I can't for the life of me identify. Khan and her father, played by the legendary Yu Hai,

are masters of Dog Fist. On the other hand, her prospective groom and his mother, played by Ge Chun-Yan, are masters of Tiger Claw. The parents constantly bicker as to who'll marry into whose family, as this decision is the factor that'll decide which family gets to learn the others kung-fu style.

Rong-Guang makes it his mission to learn the styles, however not only does he have to compete with the hostility of the villagers, the pirates also aren't far away from making a return trip, and Khan's potential other half isn't too pleased about him hanging around either. The odds are stacked against him, but thankfully, because of this there's plenty of kung-fu action. It's not a non-stop action fest, however the fights are well paced, and the Dog Fist is entertaining to watch. Utilised solely by Khan, the posture sees her stoop low to the ground, and utilize a series of kicks and punches thrown from a horizontal position. Her partner on the other hand uses more of a classical Tiger Claw style, and in one entertaining fight both Khan and her partner take on Rong-Guang using their respective styles, while Rong-Guang sticks purely to Japanese martial arts like Karate and Judo.

It all builds up to an explosive 10 minutes long finale, that has the pirates return to face off against the whole village. The 10 minutes are a slice of kung-fu heaven, as a mix of open handed and weapons-based fights lead to characters crashing through tables, walls, and anything else which can be broken. Disappointingly, despite having learnt both animal styles, Rong-Guang doesn't really seem to utilize them in his fight scenes, which is fine within the movie itself, but for the purpose of this thread it would have been nice to see him combine the Japanese martial arts with both the Dog Fist and the Tiger Claw.

All in all, though, *Deadend of Besiegers* is a fun kung-fu flick, and the Dog Fist is unique style which, while arguably under used, still features enough to leave a lasting impression. & why didn't Cynthia Khan do more period kung-fu movies!? I think I may prefer here in these than I do in her Girls with Guns flicks. (by Paul Bramhall)

Deadful Melody (Hong Kong, 1994: Ng Min-Kan) - One thing you can say about the wuxia films coming out of Hong Kong in the 1990s is that they were distinctly Hong Kong films. They were made strictly for the local box office (well, probably the local Asian box office, but still) and, as a result, were free to be as weird, outlandish, and over-the-top as they wanted, because local audiences were more or less used to this kind of thing. I remember coming out *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* the first time I saw it the theater (yes, I went to the theater three times to see it) and listening to some middle-aged Caucasian couple asking themselves why everybody was flying during the film. If something as run-of-the-mill as people running up bamboo trees was befuddling to an uninitiated Western viewer, than a film like this would probably make said viewer's head explode.

Like most wuxia films of the 1990s, the plot to *Deadful Melody* is a bit complex (although nowhere nearly as complex as other examples of the genre). The movie begins with several clans of martial artists surrounding the house of a family whose patriarch has abandoned the Martial World, but has now come into possession of a deadly lyre...yes, a deadly lyre. The lyre in question, when played correctly, can fire waves of energy that can make people explode. Anyways, the man is about to give them the lyre, as he doesn't want any conflict. However, when they kill his friend and attack his family, then things get violent. In the resulting conflagration, the man and his wife are killed, their son disappears, and their daughter escapes with the lyre.

Years later, the daughter has grown up into Brigitte Lin (*Bride with White Hair* and *Swordsman II*) who somehow has become a) a master of the lyre, b) a kung fu master, and c) filthy rich. I'm still not sure about that last one, considering how she was orphaned and abandoned with no resources with which to become rich...but there you go. Brigitte, who'll now be referred to as Snow, has hatched a plan to get revenge on the clans responsible for her parents' deaths. But she needs a way to lure them out into the open.

Enter Lui Lun (Yuen Biao, *Hero '97* and *The Peacock King*), a young man who's about to inherit his father's escort business. Being young and inexperienced in running a company, Lui Lun doesn't exactly inspire confidence in his father's old friends. However, as luck would have it, Snow shows up his door the same night he takes the company's reins, offering him an incredibly handsome sum in order to transport the lyre somewhere. Apparently, despite having disappeared for about twenty years, the lyre still has something of a negative reputation among the people. Unfortunately for Lui Lun, he can't go back on his word and now must do as he promised.

As Lui Lun is starting his journey, news of the lyre's reappearance soon reaches the clans who showed up at the beginning of the film, notably the Ghost Master (Lam Wai, who played the corrupt police chief in *Project A II*), Fire Master (Wu Ma, who had supporting comic roles in most Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung, and Corey Yuen films during the 1980s), Poisonous Witch (Siu Wing-Sang), and some other master with six-fingers. Lui and his father, who decided to accompany him for one last mission after finding out that the lyre was involved, are soon set upon by bandits, interestingly enough by the son of one of the clan leaders, who happens to be the person Snow wants Lui to deliver the lyre to.

Among the people who are trying to get the lyre is a young, feisty swordswoman named Tam Yuet-Wah (Carina Lau, *Project A 2* and *She Shoots Straight*). Tam is Fire Master's main disciple and, just for the record, Fire Master is decidedly less evil than the other masters. Instead of attacking Lui outright, Tam plays the role of an innkeeper in order to earn Lui's trust, especially when the inn suddenly fills up with would-be robbers and Lui decides that he needs to protect the innkeeper as much as he needs to protect the lyre. Although Tam eventually tries to steal the lyre while Lui is sleeping (only to be foiled by the appearance of Snow, who is actually keeping close tabs on Lui's mission), the swordswoman soon finds out that she's falling in love with the amateur escort.

Let's go back to Snow a little. I mentioned that she was keeping close watch on Lui. There's a good reason for this: Lui may be a reasonably good fighter, but he's clearly no match for the supernatural powers of some of the people out to get the lyre. Thus, when someone like Poisonous Witch for example shows up trying to steal the lyre, Snow steps in without Lui realizing it to make sure the lyre will make it to its destination. So, remember how I mentioned that the son of the guy that Lui was supposed to deliver the lyre to had tried to steal it earlier? Well, not too long after he did that, Snow decided to teach him a little lesson about the dangers of stealing. Unfortunately for Lui and his dad, when they present the lyre to Hon Suen (Chung Fat, *Yes, Madam* and *Rosa*) and Mr. Hon finds his own son's head in the box, you can imagine things are not going to go well for them.

It's a given that when watching a wuxia film from the 1990s, you'll probably be bombarded with an absurd amount of characters, enough changing alliances to fill an entire trilogy, and lots of over-the-top craziness in terms of action. *Deadful Melody* has some of that, although thankfully it avoids making the plot so convoluted that you have to watch it multiple times in order for it to make sense. There are a lot of characters, but most of them are bad guys (the degree to which they are bad varies from character to character) and there are few shifting

alliances, but the story is a lot easier to follow than, say, *Swordsman* or *Kung Fu Cult Master*.

Chinese wuxia films are generally based off of existing wuxia novels, or at least are steeped in genre conventions. I guess that one of those conventions is that the story is, by law, obligated to have an ending that ranges from bittersweet to soul-crushingly depressing. I find it interesting then that *Deadful Melody* has all the makings of a film that will end in such a way, but actually foregoes the downbeat path for the most part, making the end a lot more sweet than bitter, if you catch my drift. Throughout the film, Snow is shown growing more and more obsessed with her quest for revenge against the clan leaders, thus setting us up for a tragic death at the film's climax. That actually doesn't happen. She actually gets her revenge and gets away with it, which was rather unexpected. The only real bitter part about the ending is that Tam doesn't really get to declare her love for Lui, because her master is more or less rendered an invalid for the rest of his days by the time the smoke clears from the final showdown, and so she is obligated by duty to take care of him. But even there it isn't so sad because the subplot wasn't developed a whole lot and the script left it somewhat ambiguous as to whether Lui felt the same way for Tam.

But enough about this. After all, we're here for the action right? This is *A Beautiful Film Worth Fighting For*, right? Well, just an introduction to the action: it's choreographed by Meng Hoi and Lee King Chu. Most of my readers will recognize Meng Hoi as being the lead actor in *Hell's Wind Staff* and *Buddha Assassinator* and thus will know that Mr. Meng is an accomplished onscreen acrobat and a respectable screen fighter. Well, the man is also a very accomplished fight choreographer, having worked on such old school classics as the loopy *Kung fu vs. Yoga* and kicking classic *Death Duel in Kung Fu*. Back in the 1980s, Meng Hoi walked away with quite a few nominations alongside colleagues Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung, and Corey Yuen for best action design at the Hong Kong Film Awards, for films like *Dragon Lord*; *Ninja in the Dragon's Den*; *The Pedicab Driver*; *Royal Warriors*; and *Yes, Madam!*

Lee King Chu is best known for having worked alongside Lau Kar-Leung for a number of his most beloved films, like *Legendary Weapons of China*, *The Martial Club*, and *Eight Diagram Pole Fighter*. That should in and of itself be a testament to the man's ability to choreograph legendary fights. But wait! There's more. He also choreographed *License to Steal*, one of the best modern day action films of the late 1980s/early 1990s, featuring the inestimable talents of Yuen Biao, Joyce Mina Godenzi, Collin Chou, AND Billy Chow (how can you lose with a cast like that?). Most of his post-Shaw Brothers career, however, was dedicated to low budget horror films, didn't seem all that befitting to a man of his caliber.

Like many wuxia films of the 1990s, *Deadful Melody* is more a choreographer's film than an actor's film in terms of fight scenes. What I mean by that, of course, is that the success of the set pieces depends more on the ingenuity of the action directors than the physicality of the performers. The action here is not too different than what you'd see in a Ching Siu-Tung film from the same era, like *Butterfly and Sword* or something like that. It never quite goes as over-the-top as some of the films of that era, but there's lots of flying people, some swordplay, a couple of brief moments of physical prowess courtesy of Yuen Biao, and lots of exploding people. The film's main calling card is the Magic Lyre, which can reduce entire armies to mulch in a few seconds. There are more optical effects present in this film than a lot of other wuxia films and the set pieces are pretty fun, if not exactly memorable.

Deadful Melody is ultimately an entertaining, but unexceptional wire-fu film from the time when wire-fu was entering its first twilight—the wacky wire-fu film had reached its apex in 1993 and by 1994, only a few real important entries in the genre (*Fist of Legend*, *Drunken Master II*, and *New Legend of Shaolin*) would make any sort of impact on the local

box office. The action is entertaining and the story is easy to follow by genre standards; I haven't mentioned the acting because I watched the English dub, which is quite bad, even by my (very) low standards. Still, as far as I'm concerned, *Deadful Melody* was 90 minutes well spent. (by Blake Matthews)

Dr. Wei and the Scripture with No Words (Hong Kong, 1996: Tony Ching Siu-Tung) - Ching Siu-Tung. That name evokes mixed emotions from me. On one hand, he's considered to be one of the best fight directors to come out of Hong Kong and it's easy to see why. Anyone who's seen his Hong Kong movies know that they're filled to the brim with inventive and stylish (not to mention incredibly wire-enhanced) action sequences. On the other hand, I often feel like he allows his creativity to get out of hand to the point that many of his movies are never tour-de-forces for the talent that works with him. I felt that way after having watched *The Heroic Trio* and *Swordsman II*. His style can be described as being "balletic" in nature, as he specializes in swordfights, usually done with a lot of running, twirling, jumping, and a constantly moving camera. The effect is very beautiful, but his action scenes are rarely the good ol' fashioned beating that Sammo Hung and Jackie Chan have brought us for years.

These days, Mr. Ching seems to be doing somewhat well in the movie market. His work on *Shaolin Soccer* earned him a nomination for best action design at the Hong Kong awards (I wish the U.S.A. had an Oscar for that, although that means that Van Damme and Seagal might've owned that award for the first half of the 1990s). He then won that award in 2003 for his work on the Jet Li wuxia film *Hero*. He recently directed Steven Seagal in *Belly of the Beast*, which some say is his best movie in years. I saw two fight scenes from that film, and they definitely have Ching Siu-Tung written all over them (a good thing in this case). So even after 20 years, he's still having success in the action genre.

In 1996 he teamed up with Jet Li for tonight's film, *Dr. Wei and the Scripture with No Words*. The film, like *Swordsman II*, is without a doubt more of Ching Siu-Tung's film rather than Jet Li's film. That doesn't seem to matter, since it's an incredibly entertaining ride, even though a lot of people consider to be one of Li's lesser films.

The movie uses the "story-within-a-story" premise, much like *The Neverending Story*. However, Wolfgang Peterson's film never had wire-fu in it, but that's another story. For simplicity's sake, I'll go over the details of the human story and then Dr. Wei's story separately. Jet Li plays Chow Si-Kit, an author of a famous story series called "The King of Adventurers." However, these days, Kit has reached a point of almost incurable writer's block. Turns out that his wife Monica (Rosamund Kwan) is wanting to divorce him. As much as Kit's assistants (Takeshi Kaneshiro and Charlie Yeung) try to console him, he just doesn't have anymore ideas.

One night, Kit gets drunk and his spying assistants decide to bring him to his office to sleep it off. While he's passed out, the two decide to write his story adding their own little touches to it. When he gets sober, he adds to what his colleagues have written, but instead puts his own twists into the story. The rest of human side of the story involves an elevator accident and everyone at the hospital taking turns writing the adventure, with Monica finishing the story off.

The volume of "The King of Adventurers" that we get to watch tells the story of the search for "The Scripture with No Words." It begins with Dr. Wei (Jet Li playing Kit's alter-ego) and his assistant (Takeshi Kaneshiro playing himself) saving a bunch of slaves from a giant mechanical ox. I'm not sure who came up that idea. Maybe someone said, "Let's put this scene in the movie so we can say, 'This film features Jet Li scaling a giant mechanical ox!'"

After that bizarre adventure, Dr. Wei is commissioned by a top Chinese official to get a hold of a magical box that contains the scripture with no words. He is informed that the information regarding its whereabouts are being held by the Japanese at the consulate. With the help of a drunken crime boss friend of theirs, Jet and Shing get into a party at the consulate by dressing in drag(!). Now you may find that weird, but Jet Li had already dressed in drag twice before that in *Kids from Shaolin* and *Martial Arts from Shaolin*.

After getting in, Dr. Wei and Shing manage to find the safe where the documents are located and escape, but not before having to take on fighting Billy Chow (who plays a Japanese general in an obvious nod to his role in *Fist of Legend*) and some Japanese guards in a fight involving excessive undercranking, a pen, and flying sheets of paper. He also flirts with a Japanese waitress named Cammy (Rosamund Kwan) before high-tailing it.

Dr. Wei and Shing are about to deliver the documents to the official, but the meeting is broken up when the Japanese arrive and start throwing poison gas at the crowds. During the ruckus, Dr. Wei rescues Cammy from the gas and escapes on a train, which ends up going haywire and crashing through multiple buildings before stopping. I will make note at this moment that this film has about as much property damage as a typical Godzilla film. Similar to most of his films, when a character gets hit or kicked, there's a high probability that he/she will fly several yards back before hitting a wall and *destroying* it at the same time.

With the official dead, Dr. Wei and Shing begin to search for the box themselves. The documents point them in the direction of a newspaper. I guess this newspaper isn't very well-liked, as not only does it have barb wire and sand bags protecting the front of it, but people are constantly trying to assassinate the editor and burn the place down. Dr. Wei and Shing get themselves hired as security guards there. It turns out that the box is indeed being kept there, although it's being guarded by the editor, who likes to walk around with a cape and a basket on his head.

The Japanese, wanting to get the box, desire to hire a bandit named Hung Sing, who's in charge of the Salt Gang, the same group of people that tried to steal the box a century before. Hung Sing and his gang raid the newspaper but the journalists all escape with baskets on their heads, trying to confuse the bad guys. During the fracas, Dr. Wei and the editor take on Hung Sing while Shing is captured by the Japanese.

Shing is taken to the Japanese HQ, where they try to execute him using poison gas. Dr. Wei arrives to save him, but soon discovers that General Chow and his army of ninjas and sumo wrestlers won't let them get away quite so easily(!). Now, it is a proven fact that Ching Siu-Tung likes ninjas. I mean, what self-respecting martial arts film fanatic doesn't? Ching's first film, *Duel to the Death* featured ninjas prominently. Ninjas also were an integral part of the second two installments of the Swordsman films. Ninjas, or armed guys dressed up as ninjas are an integral part of the Ching Siu-Tung experience. Another reviewer of B-movies and I once agreed that Ching Siu-Tung must've been influenced by Japanese fantasy films like *The Magic Serpent* which featured ninjas doing crazy things. Whether or not that's true, I don't know. But I did like the idea of Jet Li countering the ninjas' katana with a soft weapon like the chain whip. It makes for an interesting contrast between hard and soft styles, as does Li's use of tai chi to fight the sumo wrestlers, who are many times bigger and heavier than he is.

Meanwhile, back at the ominous tower somewhere, Hung Sing and Cammy are fighting the editor for control of the box. By the end of the scuffle, Hung Sing is transformed into a monster, the editor is killed, and Cammy gets away with the box. Will she and the Japanese

make it to the Great Wall and find the scripture with no words? Will Dr. Wei be able to stop them? Will Ching Siu-Tung come up with other crazy ideas for action scenes?

Most people will call this a low-grade rip-off of a certain film starring Harrison Ford that whose name we won't mention. It's true, as both films are epic adventures dealing with mystical artifacts and both are set during the pre-WWII times. However, the general direction of the two films is decidedly different, as this film tends to be more of a near-parody of both adventure and Hong Kong action films. Not only that, the film covers a whole lot of ground in less than 90 minutes so the overall pace of the movie is quite fast. There's little to no time used focusing on close-up camera shots of Jet Li in a pensive stare. Oh no, that would detract from the time we need for everyone to break the laws of physics as we know them.

What I found unique about the movie is how all the characters of the story are based off the perceptions that the authors have of one another. Hence, Monica goes from a love interest to a sadistic villainess and back again as the film progresses. The main villains of the story are in fact, people that Chow dislikes in the real world. The entire story is based on elements and people from the real world (i.e. Chow's idea box in reality becomes the sacred box of the story). The fact that the fantasy portion of the film is actually a visualization of a written story, it allows Ching to work his wire-fu magic without having to really explain "Why are they doing that?" Simply put, it's pure fantasy.

As far as the cast goes, the film is in good shape. Jet Li's portrayal of Dr. Wei is quite likeable, a nice step away from his usual "stoic hero" persona. His character brings to mind his performances from *Kids from Shaolin* and *The Master*. Rosamund Kwan is as beautiful as always. Ngai Sing once again takes the role as a bad guy (he's been a bad guy in three other Jet Li movies), a villain so scary that he says his name twice (Hung Hung Sing Sing) so people will always be scared of him. Helping out the cast, at least in the subtitled version of this film, are the most inept and unintentionally funny subtitles that I've read. Stuff like "He is jealousying" and "I was hoping to cut down on fight scenes", among others just enhances the tone of the movie.

However, more important than the cast and story are the film's action scenes. I feel the same way about them that I feel with a lot of Ching's fight scenes: way too short. I often feel that a lot of his action sequences end before they begin, with few exceptions. In any case, this movie is as good a showcase for his wild imagination as any. I've mentioned two of the fight scenes already. There's another fight scene that involves a horse and carriage, a chain, a gun, a pen, an umbrella, and a puddle of water. As for the finale, let's just say that Ching Siu-Tung was channeling his inner George Lucas when he choreographed it. One thing that pleased me with this movie were a few fight scenes where Jet Li gets to show off some really fancy non-wire kicks. But other than that, it's business as usual. I may note however, that this film was nominated for Best Action Design in 1996 (another Jet Li film, *Black Mask* was nominated that same year) but lost to *Jackie Chan's First Strike*.

One guy that reviewed this movie said it was the best collection of special FX ever for a Hong Kong film. Now, granted this was said in 1996 before *The Stormriders* revolutionized the fantasy genre. There are a lot of special FX in this one: bullet-time shots, CGI shots of people disintegrating, the giant mechanical ox, in addition to the usual property destroying mayhem and wire-assisted martial arts. It's not necessarily great by Western standards, but the fact that the film never takes itself seriously ameliorates that problem.

On the whole, I really liked the movie. I really enjoyed the storyline and identified a lot with Kit's and Dr. Wei's characters, as I myself have written short stories (or at least summaries of

short story ideas) and have put in as characters people I know. I liked the fight scenes, which were creative but also allowed Jet Li to do some impressive moves by himself. While this isn't Jet Li's film, it's certainly Tony Ching's film and one of my favorite examples of the madness that he is capable of portraying onscreen.

Several years after I acquired the Chinese language version, I bought the Portuguese-dubbed version of this film (for R\$ 4, about US \$2) and lo and behold! It was the alternate version that leaves out the real world story and just focuses on the adventure. It was a nice treat; I didn't expect to see this version. I thought I'd comment on some of the changes (WARNING: Spoilers!!!).

1. Takeshi Kaneshiro's character narrates the movie as Dr. Wai's son.
2. Jet Li is called "Dr. Wai" in this version, as opposed to the Chinese version.
3. The consulate scene is extended with sequence showing Takeshi Kaneshiro conversing with guard dogs to calm them down and Jet Li and Rosamund Kwan having a bathtub encounter (and to you perverts, nothing is revealed).
4. There is more conversation showed between Charlie Yeung's character and the Headmaster.
5. The runaway train scene was actually supposed to take place after Jet's first encounter with Ngai Sing. This scene shows Rosamund Kwan getting poisoned by Billy Chow and Takeshi Kaneshiro being captured by the Japanese.
6. The scene where Jet storms the Japanese headquarters is fleshed out as we see that he's seeking the antidote as well as trying to rescue Kaneshiro's character.
7. The finale is a little more downbeat. In the revelation scene at the very end, whereas Jet's character is shown his real life alter-ego alongside Rosamund Kwan in a vision, here we are shown footage of Hiroshima(!) and the characters learn that Japan loses the war. The mystical being then goes off into some sort of religious speech about God, brotherly love, unity, etc. This is driven in further by Kaneshiro's character's narration talking about the need to trust in God! I have question whether this dialogue was really there or if it was added by the Portuguese translators and dubbers. I can't imagine a Ching Siu-Tung movie (or any Chinese movie) having so preachy dialogue.

That about sums it up. The new footage makes the adventure a lot more coherent, although the pace still is pretty breakneck. It's not as clever as the original but it's a solid adventure (now I want to watch *The Raid* and see how they compare). Like I said, it's real treat to be able to watch this version and I recommend both versions to everyone. (by Blake Matthews)

Dragon Chronicles: Maidens of Heavenly Mountain (Hong Kong, 1994: Andy Chin) – aka *Semi-Gods and Semi-Devils* - Upon release in 1994, the reasonably big-budgeted *Dragon Chronicles* crashed like a wireless wuxia warrior at the Hong Kong box office, being placed 57th that year. The script derives from a complex novel by wuxia pien guru Jin Yong, but bowdlerizes the source material out of recognition. Despite having Brigitte Lin Ching-hsia, Gong Li and Sharla Cheung Man, heavyweight stars from Taiwan, mainland China and Hong Kong, the film's box office in other territories matched its Hong Kong performance...and reputedly did the reputation of "serious" actress Gong Li no favors.

As with most thoroughly vilified films, the passing of time has been kind to *The Dragon Chronicles*. No doubt the movie is a mess, with the plot regularly collapsing into incoherence, but it retains that awe-inspiring magic that fans of wirework wuxia pien cinema love. The film is a dazzling light show of stunningly-choreographed aerial combat, powerfully-destructive

magical kung fu stances and patently-artificial special effects that meld perfectly with this hallucinatory world.

But, while thrilling the eye and igniting the senses *The Dragon Chronicles* fails to engage on any emotional level. Screenwriter Cheung Tan was clearly overwhelmed by the complex source novel, and is reduced to introducing the relationships between the main characters via a muddled voiceover seconds into the film. The basic plot of the movie is reasonably simple, but frequently vanishes in a welter of incidental detail and character motivations that whiplash between extremes, leaving the audience bewildered as to who, if anyone, they should be rooting for. Cheung had previously scripted the finely crafted remake of *Dragon Inn* (1992) that, along with numerous characters being introduced and forgotten in the same shot, suggests that some major re-editing left a lot of character development on the cutting room floor.

Workmanlike director Andy Chin Wing-keung fares better. His most interesting movie in an underwhelming career, Chin nevertheless succeeds in creating a gaudily-exaggerated, though believable, martial world. *The Heroic Trio's* cinematographer Poon Hang-sang, who lights shots like panels of comic book art, and action director Poon Kin-kwan also aid him considerably.

Though the wires are visible in numerous shots, the wirework is well executed, particularly when Mo Han-wan and Li Chou-shui take to the sky for an epic super brawl, prefaced with the audience pleasing line, "Let's fight in the sky!" Where Chin fails is in marrying a suitable music score to his kinetic visuals; too many of the gravity defying clashes are deadened by Violet Lam Man-yee's murky compositions.

A testament to the cast is that they are not drowned out amid the sound and fury, and zealously enter the spirit of the project. Lin offers another dual role that seemed to be a contractual obligation at this point of her career, playing twin sisters, one saintly and the other decadent. Li Chou-shui, the more fun of the two, is given more screen time, but the film cannot decide whether she is evil, misunderstood or actually victimized.

Gong Li's character is interesting but massively underdeveloped, leaving the actress to carry her scenes on beautiful charisma alone. Mo Han-wan is erotically attracted to Li Chong-hui, and her resulting feud with Li Chou-shui seems to be a result of this attraction as much as a struggle for power. Cheung Man's Purple, with her wide-eyed innocence masking ruthless, but ultimately benign ambition is a welcome comic relief to the warring gods, and her chicanery is a comically-mischievous counterpoint to the more Machiavellian dealings of Ting, played by Norman Chu Siu-keung with the successful broad strokes evident in his Shaw Brothers performances. Frankie Lam has the thankless role of the dull Shaolin monk, but manages to inject some bumbling humor.

Ultimately, *The Dragon Chronicles* is a big-budget pantomime, with cartoon characters and the emphasis on spectacle over coherence. Chin thinks nothing of undercutting the climactic battle between Li, Mo and Ting by having Purple striking silly poses as she attempts to adopt one of the powerful stances. Compared to this, Tsui Hark's *Zu* has the stately grace of *A Touch of Zen*, but with Hong Kong cinema rather anemic in recent times, this kind of cinematic adrenalin may again be what's needed. (by Rob Daniel of Kung Fu Cinema)

Drunken Master II (Hong Kong, 1994: Lau Kar-Leung) – aka *Legend of the Drunken Master* - It is a well-known fact that getting drunk makes a man attractive and charming, but can it also

improve his kung fu? That's the question that *Drunken Master 2*, soon to be released in the U.S. as *The Legend of Drunken Master*, seeks to answer.

Made in 1994, *Drunken Master 2* marks the first time that Jackie Chan starred in a pure chop-socky film since 1982's *Dragon Lord*. But with the resurgence of historical kung fu films in the early 1990's, spearheaded by Jet Li's *Once Upon a Time in China*, it seemed inevitable that Chan would return to the genre that made him famous. *Drunken Master 2* is a sequel of sorts to the film that elevated Jackie to stardom: 1978's *Drunken Master*.

Chan's role is that of Wong Fei Hong, the same folk hero played by Jet Li in *QUATIC*. But unlike Li's mature portrayal, we are supposed to be seeing a much younger Wong Fei Hong. Think of it as Wong Fei Hong: Year One, an exploration of Fei Hong's path to becoming the responsible leader of legend. The only problem with this concept is that Jackie Chan is forty years old, and his character is supposed to be half his real age. He even has a good ten years on Anita Mui, who is cast in the role of Fei Hong's stepmother.

The year is 1915 (or thereabouts), and Fei Hong is traveling by train with his father, Wong Kei Ying (Ti Lung, star of *A Better Tomorrow*). Fei Hong insists on a minor bit of con artistry to get a valuable ginseng root (in a special box) through customs without paying duty taxes, but his chicanery puts him in conflict with Fu (Lau Ka Leung), an elderly gent who steals an identical box from the same train. Because this is a kung fu film, Fei Hong and Fu don't even try to discern the other's motives, or make sure that they have the right boxes, or even say, "Hi." Faster than you can say "Spider-man vs. Captain America," Fei Hong and Fu are fighting underneath the train with spears and swords.

Fei Hong returns to the train with a box, but of course it is the wrong box. This one contains an Imperial royal seal. It is revealed that a group of smugglers, using a foundry as a cover and in league with the British, are conspiring to rob China of all its imperial treasure. Because Fei Hong has this valuable artifact he becomes the smugglers' target. In one memorable scene the smugglers arrange to have someone steal Madame Wong's purse. Fei Hong chases the thief down, only to be confronted by the smugglers' goons, apparently intent on testing Fei Hong's kung fu. The fight that follows becomes most remarkable when Madam Wong begins supplying her stepson with alcohol, allowing him to release the drunken master within.

For those readers unfamiliar with drunken boxing, it was established as a style in the original *Drunken Master*. Essentially, getting drunk guarantees that Fei Hong will feel no pain as he performs unpredictable moves based on the kind of things a drunk might do. So there is a lot of stumbling about, lurching erratically, etc. It's as if a bunch of frat boys got together and tried to come up with a fighting style. Topping off this boisterous combat technique is the habit of kung-fu masters to name every move after something else in life, loudly proclaiming that name as they execute the move. So we're treated to Hong Kong translations (which are questionable at the best of times) of phrases like "Han washing pot!" and "Barber cutting his own hair!" as the martial artists pull off some highly unlikely moves. Frankly, more realistic phrases like "Wino passing out in gutter!" and "College student vomiting repeatedly!" would have amused us more, but we guess that those would not be very good kung fu moves.

There are two fights in particular that have joined the pantheon of legendary kung fu action scenes. The first is a fight in a restaurant where Fei Hong and Fu take on dozens of goons armed with hatchets. As the fight goes on the building is utterly destroyed, and Wong improvises a weapon out of a bamboo pole that slices, dices and makes julienne fries. The final fight, between Jackie and his real-world bodyguard Ken Lo, is a masterful display of physical prowess and wordless comedy. It is in this scene we find out that irresponsible ingestion of

alcohol makes you super strong. So listen to Wong Fei Hong, kids: get drunk and beat people up! It's the traditional Chinese way!

When he's not beating the rice noodles out of every stunt extra on screen or contorting his body in seven directions at once, Jackie Chan participates in the film's plot, which, like many Hong Kong productions, is historical with comedic overtones (heavy on the slapstick and low humor) and occasional flashes of dramatic realism. Since Hollywood has so greatly compartmentalized the genres of film (especially now that Blockbuster Video stores dot the landscape of America like stocky younger siblings of the omnipresent McDonalds restaurants), it's no wonder that we find a film with a great variety of story aspects refreshing. Some of the story aspects and character portrayals can be a bit grating (Anita Mui in particular has the ability to make sounds like a drowning cat), but on the whole it's an engaging little story about Fei Hong's struggle to find acceptance in the eyes of a demanding father. Oh yeah, and there's this little bit about Chinese pride and those who would rob the proud country of its historical treasures. Don't forget the romantic subplot. And did we mention that Jackie Chan kicks the collective ass of about two hundred hired thugs? (by Scott Hamilton and Chris Holland of Stomp Tokyo)

Drunken Master III (Hong Kong, 1994: Lau Kar-Leung) - After being fired from Jackie Chan's *Drunken Master II*, Lau Kar-Leung teamed up with another studio to make this unofficial "sequel" to the yet-to-be-released Jackie Chan masterpiece, quite possibly in hopes of making a buck off of the upcoming film (note: I read that in another review, although considering this film was released in July and *DM2* in February, I don't know how true it is), Asylum-style. Well, that was probably the what the studio thought. Lau probably just wanted to show Chan that he could make his own *Drunken Master* movie. Unfortunately, the end product is a pretty sad little effort and all-around waste of the talents involved. It actually makes the extremely uneven *Drunken Monkey* look pretty good in comparison.

Set after the fall of the Qing Dynasty, Yuan Shi-Kai (a historical figure who showed up in such 90s films as *Blade of Fury* and *Little Heroes on the Run*) is trying to set up a new dynasty in China, much to the chagrin of Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, who wants to install democracy in China. To consolidate his power, Yuan must marry a princess who holds a jade ring deemed sacred by the anti-foreigner White Lotus Sect (who showed up in *Legendary Weapons of China* and *Once Upon a Time in China 2*). Bizarrely enough, the head of the White Lotus Sect is played by Italian martial artist Giorgio Pasotti, but don't ask me what the heck is up with that. Anyway, the princess (played by the hawt Michelle Reis) is taken away by rebel patriot Yeung Kwun (Andy Lau, who has more to do here than in *DM2*). They are injured during the escape and end up in Po Chi Lam. Yeung Kwun entrusts an injured princess in the care of Wong Kai-Ying (Adam Cheng). When she gets better, Wong has his son, Wong Fei-Hung (Willie Chi, of *Burning Paradise*), take the princess to the rebels' rendez-vous point.

During the trip, the Wong and the princess end up at a huge winery run by an altruistic martial artist, Uncle Yan (Lau Kar-Leung). The princess begins to doubt her position as the next queen of China while Wong Fei-Hung refines his drunken boxing with Uncle Yan. The White Lotus Sect eventually appears at the winery and make off with the princess after a big fight. So Wong Fei-Hung, Uncle Yan, Wong Kai-Ying, and Yeung Kwun storm a Halloween party and open up a can of a whoop before the White Lotus Cult can sacrifice the princess to get the gods' approval for Yuan Shi-Kai to become king.

Lordy.

As a fight fan, the first major problem is that there's almost no major fight sequence until about 40 minutes in, when Willie Chi has a long, but uninteresting fight with Simon Yam, who plays a gay rebel. Then we have to wait a little longer for the big fight at the winery, which is better, but still below the performers' abilities. The only fight that pays off is the extended finale, but even then, the whole drunken style bit is mainly an afterthought. Wong Fei-Hung never gets drunk (which may be a Lau Kar-Leung decision), but like Willie Chi's "hung gar" in *Burning Paradise*, it feels more like generic wushu with some stances thrown in for flavor. Pops himself was more impressive in *DM2* than he is here. Adam Cheng gets to perform some vintage swordplay, which fans may enjoy. The duel between Andy Lau and Gordon Liu is actually pretty good, which is sorta sad when you think about it. By and large, this film is a letdown in the action department.

The result of the problems listed above mean that I as a viewer end up paying more attention to the other flaws. The comedy is largely unfunny and the characters are annoying. Wong Fei-Hung is devoid of any personality whatsoever beyond him being an arrogant guy with a sharp tongue. In the end, the hero could have been a generic martial artist who went by the name "Lee" and the film wouldn't have lost anything. The princess is the only person who has anything resembling a character arc. So yeah, there's some bad writing here. And why in Shen's name would an anti-foreigner cult like the White Lotus be cheffed by an Italian? And why would they perform a ritual on Halloween, a Western Holiday/celebration? And why would they wear Western Halloween masks while doing so? Man, even the derivative Red Flower Society in *Once Upon a Time in China 4* were more credible than these bozos.

So yeah, this big disappointment is only for Drunken Boxing or Lau Kar-Leung completists. (by Blake Matthews)

Eagle Shooting Heroes (Hong Kong, 1993: Jeff Lau) - For those who found **Zu: Warriors of the Magic Mountain** and *The Holy Flame of the Martial World* too austere, there is *The Eagle Shooting Heroes*, possibly the single weirdest film to come out of the world's most irrepressible film industry.

Drawing from the same Jin Yong source novel as *Ashes of Time* (and retaining most of the cast) *The Eagle Shooting Heroes* is the raging yang to Wong Kar Wai's sober ying. The two movies were shot concurrently through Wong's production company and make a fascinating double bill. Comparisons can be made, for example Leung Chiu-Wai plays the Leslie Cheung role from *Ashes of Time* and Leslie Cheung takes over Leung Ka-Fai's role from Wong Kar Wai's film, but are ultimately futile: *The Eagle Shooting Heroes* defiantly stands alone, sniggering at its own insanity. Journeyman director Lau shoots with an efficient eye, moving Sammo Hung's action and the general lunacy of the piece to the foreground.

Overcooked and overloaded in every department, *The Eagle Shooting Heroes* will either delight wuxia pian fans eager to gawp at their idols indulging in pantomime-fu (see Cannes Best Actor recipient Leung Chiu-Wai mimicking a duck in front of a gorilla-gram!) or will have them bewilderedly slapping the disc on ebay. Middle ground opinions are unlikely.

Not that this is a plotless melange of mugging; there is plot to spare in the two hour (over)long running time. To barely scrape the surface, Ou Yang Feng (Leung Chiu-Wai) has plotted with his cousin (Yip) to overthrow the King and take control of the kingdom. They aim to remove his feisty daughter, Third Princess (Lin), who is on a mission with Wang Yao Shih (Leslie Cheung) to find a martial arts scroll containing secrets that can defeat the malicious Feng.

Feng reluctantly teams with the Beggar King (Jacky Cheung, who played the same character more somberly in *Ashes of Time*), who is suicidal after his amorous advances are rejected by Wang's sweetheart (Wong). The Beggar King wishes to be killed by Feng, whose attempts at murder frequently result in self-mutilating accidents.

Running parallel to this is pretty boy Tuan Wang Yeh's (Leung Ka-Fai) attempts to achieve immortality. This disparate group of misfits first meet in an inn (as in *Ashes of Time* or *Dragon's Gate Inn*) for an eventful night of farcical bedroom hopping, and in the climactic punch-up.

Like *The Matrix* you can't be told what *The Eagle Shooting Heroes* is, you have to see it for yourself. A mere plot synopsis omits the incidental jaw droppers: an impromptu football game with Tony Leung Ka-Fai's disembodied head, set to a Chinese reversion of the 'Match of the Day' theme; Brigitte Lin running around with a costume dinosaur's toilet, and said dinosaur kung-fuing bad guys in the climax; uneasy fun being made of Leslie Cheung's sexuality as he nauseously rejects Leung Ka-Fai's advances. Or, best of all, truth centipedes that reside in the victim's stomach and cause great pain when a small drum is beaten... Marvel at Tony Leung Chiu-Wai, Maggie Cheung and Veronica Yip's three way drum-beating-belly-aching Mexican standoff.

Amazingly, *The Eagle Shooting Heroes* about manages to have its cake and food fight with it. The set and costume design capture the gaudy spectacle of a Bollywood epic while Hung's pinball-fu action crackles with invention and wit; he is arguably given more room to shine here than in *Ashes of Time*.

The cast, bizarrely enough the finest ever gathered for a Hong Kong film, clearly relish ribbing the genre to which they were at the time wed, yet still deliver the kind of acrobatics audiences have come to expect from Hong Kong action cinema.

'Carry on Wuxia' it may be, but in execution and energy *The Eagle Shooting Heroes* is the most polished in-joke ever made. Or would you prefer Robert De Niro in *The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle*? Didn't think so. (by Rob Daniel of Far East Films)

East is Red, The (Hong Kong, 1993: Tony Ching Siu-Tung) – aka Swordsman 3: The East is Red

- John Woo may be the best known Hong Kong director in the West. The works of Wong Kar Wai and Stanley Kwan -- and even Ann Hui -- probably have played and garnered more honors at the more prestigious international film festivals. Johnnie To and his Milkyway Productions may be the current top dogs in the now Special Administrative Region of China. For this fan of movies from that part of the world though, it is Tsui Hark and his Film Workshop who really rule, excite and stimulate as well as often transport me into fantastic fantasy realms which would be beyond most other people's imaginations and abilities to bring into (cinematic) being.

Although *Swordsman III: The East is Red* is undoubtedly a lesser as well as flawed Film Workshop production, there also is no denying its being close to overflowing with incredible sights, sounds, ideas and critiques. We are, after all, talking about a fantasy drama in which are to be found: Ninjas on kites; a midget samurai; a pigeon-spitting albino who had been inside the skin of a Highlander woman; martial artists with powers that verge on the -- or indeed are -- supernatural (and hence are able to repel bullets and cannon balls as well as fly!); and so much more. Then there is the fact, commented upon by David Bordwell in his masterful "Planet Hong Kong" book, that: "Only about five minutes of THE EAST IS RED...are

without musical accompaniment; no more than a minute goes unscored" (2000:186-187). And what fantastic music much of it is too; the kind that will get under your skin and touch your soul as well as cement itself in your memory!

Amidst all this is the moviemakers' bid to sound off on a whole host of rather serious and weighty topics even while working hard to entertain the audience. Granted that some people - who see *The East is Red* as just a massive but mainly fun action romp -- might think I myself have gone over the edge when they read the following...but this (re)viewer firmly believes that this clearly ambitious film also contains thought-provoking meditations on such as: Faith (in the personal and religious sense); power; science versus the mysterious; the individual's bid and (in)ability to affect the course of history; the limits of personal achievement; what ordinary people want; and what is really meant by great success. Relatedly, Tsui Hark's sense of irony and propensity for political commentary is there for all to see -- yet often not realized by those without the requisite cultural knowledge -- in this film's English title being the same as that of a famous Maoist anthem but its Chinese one literally translating as "Invincible Asia 2: Turbulence Again Rises".

Actually, *The East is Red's* major problem might well be that it possesses too much for anyone to adequately take in and appreciate -- especially upon a single viewing -- as well as tries to do, say and be too many things on too limited a budget; the logical outcome, perhaps, of its having Ching Siu Tung (*A Chinese Ghost Story I-III*) and Raymond Lee (*Dragon Inn* and *Police Confidential*!) as co-directors as well as Tsui Hark as its producer. In any case, there is no denying that this 108 minute length work is saturated with a near overwhelming feeling of having helmers who favor extreme measures and being incredibly prone to irrational mood swings (characteristics akin to that which one associates with its main character, the single real connection to "Swordsman II", Asia the Invincible).

Considering how much Asia the Invincible looms over proceedings here, there is ample reason to believe that this 1993 production was largely conceived as a way to give fans of the very popular *Swordsman II* further opportunity to luxuriate in the filmic presence of that singular being; whose attraction surely is added by his/her/its being portrayed by the mesmerizing Brigitte Lin Ching-Hsia (who stole that 1992 show from the top-billed Jet Li even though she had less screen time than him, Michelle Reis and maybe even Rosamund Kwan). The leading actress' considerable dramatic -- but also self-parodic -- talents are definitely put to good use by way of having her mercurial character effectively come back from the dead to variously take on the roles of: Vengeful as well as angry god(ess); questing wanderer; a cocky prostitute in a Japanese military camp; a commander of a Spanish galleon as well as a Japanese warship with the capacity to convert into a submarine; an expert at "sewing needle fu" who can block valves and cause men's hearts to explode on command; and, alternately, a beneficiary, spurner and appreciator of an immensely faithful as well as sensual lover.

Nonetheless, I can't help but think that *The East is Red* would have benefited from focusing (even) more on Brigitte Lin's character and having him/her/it interact more with the man who thought it worth dying just to catch a glimpse of the legendary Highlander (Chinese military officer Koo is portrayed Yu Rong Guang) and the concubine who was unwilling to stop loving her master (In tandem with Jean Wong but also Ms. Lin, in an erotic montage which I have taken to calling "the tongue scene"(!), Joey Wong heats up the screen in this by no means insignificant or passive role). At the very least, this would have made for a less sprawling and better structured picture. It has to be admitted though that this Brigittephile wished that it had been so in large part because this already satisfying, even if chaotic, work -- which I appreciate more with each additional rewatch -- would then have contained still more images of and scenes with a charismatic actress whose visage as well as actions I don't think I will ever

tire of viewing. (by YTSL of View from the Brooklyn Bridge)

Emperor and the Assassin, The (PRC, 1998: Chen Kaige) - Three years before the release of Zhang Yimou's *Hero*, Chen Kaige finished his lavish epic *The Emperor and the Assassin*, and like *Hero* it is set during the rise of the Qin empire. Taking three years to film and even longer to research, *The Emperor and the Assassin* could be regarded as one of the last true epics as no digital effects are used, thousands of extras were hired and a palace five times the size of the real Forbidden City was built especially for this film.

King of Qin, King Ying Zhang (Li Xuejian), is bound by a mandate dictated by his ancestors to unite the seven kingdoms of China and unify them "all under heaven". By fulfilling this obligation it is his belief that conquering the other kingdoms will result in peace after years of civil war. His wife to be, Lady Zhao (Gong Li), has grown weary of palace life and wishes to return to her home of Zhao. However, she is moved by Ying Zhang's desire to unite China and bring peace. They then conger a plot that will cause the powerful kingdom of Yan to send an assassin to kill Ying Zhang, then giving him good reason to lay siege to Yan. It is Lady Zhao's belief that the kingdom of Yan would surrender before any blood was spilt, and harbours such confidence in the plan, that she even has her face branded to give credibility to the façade of being exiled. She then goes to the kingdom of Yan, and finds a suitable candidate to carry out the assassination in the form of Jing Ke (Zhang Fengyi), who has no fear of death. However, in her absence Ying Zhang becomes increasingly ruthless after learning a few home truths.

Released a year earlier, *The Emperor and the Assassin* missed the wave of western interest created by *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. As such it only received a limited release in the US. However, 'The Emperor and the Assassin' is more than worthy of being mentioned in the same breath as *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*. In fact, in some ways it is superior to all three of the aforementioned films, namely in it's narrative and its attention to character development. Be warned however that *The Emperor and the Assassin* is not an action film, nor is it meant to be. It is an efficient historical drama. What little action that does exist is very brief, grittily realistic but perfect for this film.

It may not have the dazzling visuals of Yimou's *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*, but the cinematography remains of the highest quality and is still a beautifully shot film. With its palette of muted colours it boasts an almost sepia quality. Coupled with the expertly measured (though some may find it bordering on slow) pacing of the film the result is somewhat mesmerising. With the web of political intrigue and the destruction of Ying Zhang's family, interest is always sustained as Ying Zhang is corrupted by his power and ambition in his quest to fulfil his ancestors mandate and his own ideals.

Overall, *The Emperor and the Assassin* is a minor masterpiece and comes highly recommended, though it should be stated that this is not a film for everyone. Chen Kaige has performed admirably to weave the intricate plot strands together without causing the narrative to become convoluted. It certainly deserves more attention than it has received. (by Pat King of Far East Films)

Erotic Ghost Story (Hong Kong, 1990: Lam Nai-Choi) - The focus of this very entertaining film is most definitely more on the erotic than on the ghost aspects of the title. And erotic it is - as it is full of lush photography and even lusher women that give off quite an electric charge in all states of dress or undress. The film has quite a bit of nudity and sexual situations – so don't rent it for the little kiddies.

Three sisters who are in fact fox spirits have taken on human form – and what human form indeed – though the only resemblance between them would not be their large eyes! The camera spends much of the time panning down below their necks in this film. The sisters (of whom I only know Amy Yip) have to maintain a strict moral lifestyle for 36 days or they will revert to their animal essence and lose their human soul. It doesn't seem a lot to do – but those foxy instincts make it very difficult, as does the handsome young scholar who lives down the road.

One by one the sisters wander into his house and leave later with a large smile planted on their face. They soon learn that each one has been toiling away in the same garden – but being sisters they don't mind. They invite the scholar to come live with them and share him equally. This leads to pool parties, frolicking about and fruit orgies. Some guys have all the luck.

Even when the scholar is not around the sisters find things to do as there seems to be no taboos in the fox society regarding sisterly love.

It eventually occurs to them though that this might not exactly fall into the definition of a strict moral lifestyle and sure enough they begin to grow hair on their chests. Ow – the Yipster with chest hair is not a pleasant sight!

They visit the scholar to make things right only to discover that he is not exactly what he appears. The three heads tip them off – though I always thought that most women would love a man with three heads. One to watch football, one to make love and one to listen to their complaints! Just kidding. The sisters now realize that they will have to fight to the death to keep their human soul.

This is a fun little film – that is more erotically charged and explicit than I was expecting (that's not a complaint!) – with some cheesy special effects. The Yipster is in fine form – and though she continues her little trick of never quite revealing it all – she is still quite a special effect in her own right. There are a few sequels to this film with different actresses I believe.

Tai Seng has just released this in the US in letterbox format and the quality of the picture is excellent. Unfortunately, they are pricing it at \$60 for the tape so ask your video store to get it. (by Brian of View from the Brooklyn Bridge)

Erotic Ghost Story 2 (Hong Kong, 1991: Peter Ngor) - Sex, eroticism, or illicit nookie (if you're Talbot Rothwell) has played a potent part in Chinese ghost stories going back to their literary origins with scholar Pu Songling. Their bawdier aspects were emphasized in a run of saucy screen adaptations from Shaw Brothers auteur Li Han-hsiang, while a more elegant, if no less scintillating, sensuality characterized the celebrated supernatural romances of the Eighties and Nineties. For all its lyricism and artistry, people often forget that *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987) has Joey Wong as a ghost who basically shags men to death. These films in turn spawned a more salacious string of Category III sexploitation ghost stories dragging the genre back to the down and dirty. *Erotic Ghost Story* (1990) was among the first, a vehicle for busty sex starlet Amy Yip with a plot that plays like a softcore variation on *The Witches of Eastwick* (1987): horny "god of lust" Wu Tung seduces three heavenly fairies who eventually rebel and end his wicked ways. Although the presence of Amy Yip gained the original some cult infamy, its sequel is superior, stranger and sexier. Part two reduces the Yipster to a small cameo (as a nun!) but plays like Hammer horror meets Emmanuelle as filtered through the deranged mindset of Ken Russell. The result is even wilder than that sounds.

Having been reincarnated for his sins, Wu Tung now inhabits the Earth as a horny, heavy metal demon called Chiu-Sheng (Anthony Wong). Snarling bare-chested in bronze shoulder pads with a shaggy white mane, making him look like refuge from glam rock band KISS, plus a phallic tail, he demands a virgin sacrifice lest he terrorize the local village. Each year the local lottery selects one unlucky lass for Chiu-Sheng to ravish back at his dry ice-and-red latex lair while his demon concubine (Sayuri Ichijo) cavorts about dripping candle wax over her naked body. Night upon night of non-stop shagging, soon turns the poor peasant girl into a zombified satanic sex slave.

One year on, winsome heroine Fang Yu-Yin (Charine Chan Ka-Ling) is mortified when her number comes up, especially since she has only just fallen for handsome fisherman Shan-Ken (Kwok Yiu-Wah), who has a sexy sister called Chan (Chik King-Man), a loincloth clad warrior-babe. Remember her, she's important. Unwilling to surrender his true love, Shan-Ken grabs an axe and hacks into Chiu-Sheng, just as the demon realises Yu-Yin is the reincarnation of his long-lost love from heaven, Hsiao Yen (Chang Siu-Yin). Small world, huh? While Chiu-Sheng retreats into a mystical cocoon to heal his wounds, his demon concubine sneaks into the village seeking vengeance. Her evil plan involves seducing Shan-Ken's lusty neighbour (Gwong Ting-Woh) and his nymphomaniac wife (Kong Hang-Ngai) via an astounding threesome wherein they go at it atop a bamboo jungle gym amidst billowing sheets and floating bubbles to the sounds an incongruous disco-reggae beat. Somehow this unholy union triggers a village wide outbreak of satanic carnality, sending the yokels into a sex-frenzy involving men, women and... what's that guy doing with that pig?! The randy neighbour is slain and his wife abducted and bisected by the newly-revived Chiu-Sheng, who sets to frantically screwing her lower half while her upper torso complains about a lack of satisfaction! Shan-Ken becomes a reluctant voyeur, imprisoned in a block of ice, prompting Yu-Yin and an axe-wielding Chan to set out and save him.

No less than six writers crafted this crazed concoction, among them the incredibly prolific Sze To On, who penned over two hundred screenplays including sleazy gems like *Bewitched* (1981) and *The Boxer's Omen* (1983), both of which display a similarly lurid imagination. Produced by Golden Harvest, the sumptuous cinematography and production values leave this a classier kind of erotica in spite of its rampant sweaty couplings and full-frontal nudity. The artful visuals have an abstract, almost avant-garde quality and the special effects are top notch. Beneath the lurid veneer of sex, gore and twisted strangeness, *Erotic Ghost Story II* spins a sweetly old-fashioned fairytale romance, one where true love conquers all. Its heroes and heroines are oddly childlike characters, earnest and pure-hearted in spite of their carnal urges. While the film flirts with hypocrisy in condemning wanton carnality as the root of all evil, sex equally proves to be our heroes' salvation. Yu-Yin thaws Shan-Ken from his cryogenic slumber using her naked body. And Chan saves the day by sharing a jaw-dropping, underwater kung fu sex duel with the raging demon!

Rather than merely stop the story for the next sex scene, the film keeps concocting ingenious and wacky new ways to integrate them into the plot. Of course, it still has its share of silliness: e.g. Chan distracts Chiu-Sheng at a crucial moment by miaowing like a cat (!) and I haven't even mentioned the flying kung fu midget monk able to morph into a flaming fireball. Nevertheless, cinematographer-turned-actor Peter Ngor Chi-Kwan maintains a furious pace, in one of his three films as director. As an actor he also appeared in that other infamous Hong Kong sex fantasy: *Sex & Zen* (1991). The no less infamous Ivan Lai took over as director on *Erotic Ghost Story III* (1993) while unauthorized rip-offs arrived in the form of *Erotic Ghost Story - Perfect Match* (1997) and *A Chinese Erotic Ghost Story* (1998). All pale into insignificance beside part two, whose guilty pleasures include the sordid spectacle of future

respected, award-winning actor Anthony Wong slumming it in glam metal drag, snarling and slobbering over beautiful women. (by Andrew Pragasam of The Spinning Image)

Erotic Ghost Story 3 (Hong Kong, 1993: Ivan Lai) - The title says it all. This is a gorgeous and sensual fantasy period piece filled with sex, spirits, and swordplay. A man and a woman hide up in a haunted temple and find a crazy monk (Shing Fui On) who transports the man into the world of a seductive painting. There he falls in love with the seductively tragic Pauline Chan, who is one of three beautiful fairies. After the extended love making scenes between the fairies ends, things go to hell as the nasty queen fairy takes the man away for her own sinister plans. Eventually, after everyone else dies, the man and the fairy get to live happily ever after on Earth.

The sets, lighting and cinematography are absolutely beautiful, and the love scenes are passionate and sensual without being too awkward and embarrassing. And they're particularly striking and romantic when they're filmed in slow motion. The fighting is stylish and energetic and the whole film is a lot of fun even if you don't have a clue what's going on. Above average Category III fare that you wouldn't be TOO embarrassed to show your friends. (by Alex Smits of Alex in Wonderland)

Fire Dragon (Hong Kong, 1994: Yuen Woo-Ping) – aka Fiery Dragon Kid - A letter is found linking a plot to overthrow the Emperor with one of his officials, Prince Six. He sends his apprentice, Red Dragon to retrieve the incriminating letter but Yuen Ming, a wandering swordsman manages to save it. Both Yuen and Red Dragon go undercover in a traveling acrobatic troupe while trying to draw each other out. Red Dragon eventually turns on her master after she bonds with the troupe members and becomes embroiled in a comical love triangle with Yuen and the troupe's leader, Lyn Yu.

Everything that makes a Yuen Wo Ping film great is found in this fiery historical fantasy. Strong female characters, intense fighting, and generous portions of humor combine for an exciting martial arts adventure.

Undoubtedly, the real showstopper is the pyrotechnics, first seen in *Iron Monkey* (1993). Flames blast out from walls, encompass Brigitte Lin's hands, and spread across water with reckless abandon. The finale ends up looking like Kuwaiti oil fields set ablaze. The action is furious at the beginning and end with a pause in the middle for Brigitte Lin's character to develop a change of heart. Brigitte manages another satisfyingly intense performance despite the unsuccessful comical rants of her costar, Sandra Ng. Expect to see more flying and superhuman feats similar to *Butterfly and Sword*.

The old uncovering of the plot to overthrow the Emperor shtick is as common as a dead armadillo on Texas asphalt. *Fire Dragon* proves it since nothing unexpected or new shows up. At times, scenes felt like they were re-shot from other genre films. Too bad for this film though. Most of the rehashed elements worked better in other films. The romantic nonsense was funnier in Wo Ping's *Wing Chun* and Brigitte Lin's bittersweet performance had greater depth in *The Bride with White Hair* (1993). But despite all that, the film is still fun to watch thanks in part to the blazing stunt work.

With a film starring Brigitte Lin and directed by Wo Ping you'd be crazy not to have high expectations. The film meets those expectations but rarely pushes boundary. That still leaves us with a great film that's sure to please action fans. (by Mark Pollard of Kung Fu Cinema)

Fist from Shaolin (Hong Kong, 1993: Martin Lau Kwok-Wai Cheung Sing-Yim) - There was once an episode of *The Simpsons* where Springfield was holding a film festival. You may remember it, as it boasted a guest appearance by Jay Sherman, the Critic himself (voiced by Jon Lovitz). In the episode, Montgomery Burns was determined to make his biopic win the top award of the festival. He tries to rope Steven Spielberg into the project, but upon discovering that he's unavailable, he demands to talk Spielberg's "Non-Union Mexican Counterpart," a fellow by the name of Señor Spielbergo. Well, this movie is the Non-Union Mexican Counterpart of the bigger-budgeted, all-star casted *Once Upon a Time in China* films. It doesn't even deserve prequel status like *Iron Monkey* or spin-off status like *Heroes Among Heroes* and *Kick Boxer*. It feels like a cheap rip-off, a sort of *Carnosaur 2* to QUATIC's *Aliens*.

The movie opens with a training on the beach sequence (just like that other movie), with snippets of Jet Li's *Shaolin Temple* film spliced in for no reason, other than that co-director Cheung Sing-Yim also directed that movie. It makes me curious as to if Cheung actually participated in the project as a whole, or if this is all the brainchild of low-level adult movie director Martin Lau. Anyway, we get to hear a song that *sounds* like QUATIC's Naam Yi Dong Ji Keung, but has different lyrics (trust me, I know--I memorized the lyrics to both the Mandarin and Cantonese versions in high school). After that we meet our heroes: Wong Fei Hung (*Golden Dart Hero's* Wang Qun), and his students, Kuan (Tam Chiu) and Ah So (Gabriel Wong). They are on their way to Canton to pick up Wong's westernized 13th Aunt (just like THAT OTHER MOVIE) from the port. Aunt Yee will be played by *Spider Force's* Sharon Kwok, who looks like a cross between Joey Wong and Elaine Lui and was probably the best actress they could get for the film's low budget. Due to a mix-up in calendar dates, they find that they have a month to waste in Canton before her ship arrives.

That night, they meet a pair of poor street performers, including a monkey kung fu-practicing child and a female singer named Hsiao Lan, for whom Ah So falls head over heels. When the local extortion gang, who'll be run by Yau Gin-Kwok (essentially reprising his role as the Sha Ho gang leader FROM THAT OTHER MOVIE), tries to take the lady's meager earnings, Wong and his men step in and dish out the kung fu justice. They take Hsiao Lan and her brother in while the two get back on their feet. After saving a rebel and the local butcher, Lam Sai-Wing, from the gang, Wong is persuaded to open a clinic and kung fu school in Canton.

This is where things get muddled. The Not-Sha-Ho gang is working for the local prefect, who makes money on the side selling opium and running a brothel out of the local convent(!). The Prefect is in league with Ji Chun-Hua's (the villain from *Fong Sai Yuk 2* and *New Legend of Shaolin*) character, who is sort of a business partner with Charles, the kickboxing English railroad magnate. Ji has been kidnapping Charles's laborers (and others) to sell into virtual slavery in the United States. Things get hairy when Hsiao Lan's mother dies and she enters the convent/brothel to make some extra bucks to pay for the funeral. The prefect tries to rape her, but is saved by Aunt Yee, Kuan and Ah So, and eventually Wong Fei-Hung himself. The bad guys get back at Wong by arresting him for allegedly harboring rebels at his clinic and begin to torture him. He's freed, but has to step up to the bad guys once more when he learns that Ah So has been kidnapped and is going to be shipped as a cheap laborer to America.

People familiar with the original *OUATIC* movie will recognize a lot of parallels between this movie's story and that of *OUATIC*. Both movies try to mix messages about the plight of the Chinese in the late 18th century with kung fu action and some broad comedy. The problem here is that *OUATIC* had a good actors, good writing, a two-plus hour running time to develop its characters and give each of them moments of drama and light comedy, and still have time for some nice kung fu battles. *Fist from Shaolin* has a lot of characters, three sets of bad guys, a number of fights, but poor writing and (not the filmmakers' fault) bad dubbing. The result is that we see a lot of characters we recognize, but the film is largely made up of broad comic sequences and jarringly violent sequences, which creates a bizarre tonal inconsistency. There isn't enough characterization and convincing drama to balance out the wannabe laughs with the occasional brutality on display.

Wong Fei-Hung and Hsiao Lan have the closest thing to a character arc. Aunt Yee is practically a non-entity here, as opposed to Rosamund Kwan's interpretation, in which her Western education frequently conflicted with the things that traditional Chinese valued. There's some talk of a possible relationship between Wong Fei-Hung and Aunt Yee, but it's quickly forgotten about. Lam Sai Wing is introduced and portrayed as one of the reasons that Wong Fei-Hung sets up shop in Canton, but the film soon forgets about him until the final fight. In *OUATIC*, Ah So had similar conflicts (he was raised in the West, so his Cantonese left a little to be desired), but here he's just comic relief. These sorts of plot holes and sketchy characters detract from the non-fight portions of the film.

The original *OUATIC* brought up the hypocrisy of Western influences in China, that promised riches in California but instead would employ the Chinese as laborers on the railroad. Such injustice was only exacerbated by the Qing officials continuously sucking up to the foreigners at the expense of their own people...well, the Han people. It did, however, balance out the anti-Western stance with a sympathetic portrayal of the Christian priest, who really hoped to do what was right at the expense of his own life. In this movie, there is only one Western character and he ultimately turns out to be reasonably sympathetic. We never see the faceless Americans buying the kidnapped laborers or those who sell opium to the prefect. We only see the Chinese (and Manchurians) screwing over those weaker than them. In other words, *OUATIC* can be said to have the message that the Chinese people were screwed on all sides, while this movie tells us that their problems were largely in-house.

The action was brought to you courtesy of the film's wushu-trained cast. Ji Chun-Hua had the most experience, having worked on numerous Hong Kong and Mainland films by this time, including Jet Li's Shaolin Temple trilogy. The other action directors had far more limited experience. There is some wire-work, but it's not very intrusive and is used very sparingly. I find it unlikely that purists will be very disappointed with the wushu on display. Wang Qun, who plays Wong Fei-Hung, does some nice fighting and uses quicker and more economic moves, much like Jet Li in *Kiss of the Dragon*. While he does some unnecessary umbrella-based fighting (LIKE THAT OTHER MOVIE!!!), there is also some solid kwan do work from him at the end (I was surprised that everybody fought with the kwan do here, which I didn't see a whole lot of in the 90s New Wave movies). He's upstaged by Tam Chiu, who plays his student Kuan. Tam Chiu performs some excellent aerial kicks and makes you wish that Tsui Hark and the Yuen's had let Yuen Biao cut loose like this in *OUATIC*. The villain performs some nice Ying Jao Pai and Ji Chun-Hua performs more actual wushu than he did in his bigger-budgeted HK appearances. The last fight is reminiscent of the the final fight in *OUATIC*, both in terms of context and setting. But there is a lot less wirework here and more actual kung fu, so purists should enjoy it.

I think fight fans and wirework detractors will enjoy this more than they did the original *OUATIC*, and on that front, it has more than enough on display to justify its existence. I just think it should've tried more to establish its own identity than to slavishly and sloppily rehash all the elements of *OUATIC*. It could've been something truly special had it done that. (by Blake Matthews)

Fist of Legend (Hong Kong, 1994: Gordon Chan) - Well, it's Christmas season again, and naturally, that brings to mind... Kung-Fu movies! It actually makes sense if you think about it a moment. Between the over-hyping of the season (the local K-Mart started decorating for Christmas in September) and the gOr as they say in their native tongue, "Nanny, nanny, foo-foo!" general quality of Christmas-themed movies (there aren't many good ones, and those that exist are played so often in this season, the mind becomes numb), you really start to feel like beating the crap out of somebody. Hence, the kung-fu action film, preferably from Hong Kong. Come to think of it, a really good Hong Kong gunplay film will do just as well. But let's stay in the hand-to-hand area for the moment, shall we?

Of course, as any regular reader of our aegis page, Stomp Tokyo, will know, there are gradations even within the Hong Kong martial arts action flick, all of which can be represented in terms of Jackie Chan movies. You've got your period pieces (any of the *Drunken Masters*, for example), the stunt extravaganza (such as *Jackie Chan's First Strike*, which was lighter on the combat and heavy on the falling and blowing things up), and the modern-era chop-socky flick (well-defined by Jackie's U.S. breakout hit, *Rumble in the Bronx*). It is the lattermost of these options that best expresses the holiday spirit these days.

Which brought me to the often-edited Jackie Chan vehicle *City Hunter*. But then, the esteemed Stomp Tokyo creators already did *City Hunter* (in fact, I first saw the film thanks to Scott), and I really don't have any new insights to relate. Sure, I could add details, due to the sheer length of my columns, but it would be just as good to go out and rent the movie for yourself. It's worth it just for the surreal "Gala Gala Happy" song, though Chimp Girl's noises get annoying after a while, just like on Cleopatra 2525. But I digress. Point is, I realized it was time to head out and rent a movie for my own self.

So me and my cohorts in cinematic crime, George and Jennie, trek on down to the local DarkStar video stMan, "The Family Circus" sucks all over the world!ore (everyone should have a cool local independent video store; Chicago is fairly crawling with them, and DarkStar has the advantages of being close and well-organized as compared to some I've seen), and pick up a triple feature. The other films are ample fodder for future reviews, but the real find was the Jet Li vehicle, *Fist of Legend*.

Regular readers of these various pages will know Jet Li was the Chinese national wu shu champion, the premier martial artist in competition at the time. He took that skill, his natural good looks, and a quiet charisma, and parleyed it into film stardom. Though his penetration into American media isn't particularly good (can we say *Lethal Weapon 4*, good people? His character was the most likable villain since Gary Busey. The man, not the character), he's like unto a god in his own country. Certainly, he's on a par with Jackie or Chow Yun-Fat. And why? Because he's damn cool.

Let's get to the movie. The year is 1937, and the Japanese occupation of Shanghai is well underway. This story being made in Hong Kong, the Chinese are naturally the complete victims (I don't know enough about this history to make moral judgments, myself, so we'll take the movie by its own premise). Jet is playing Chen Zhen, a Chinese student apparently

studying engineering in Japan. Of course, nationalistic fervor leads a bunch of young Japanese hotheads to confront Chen Zhen in class, and despite the entreaties of Yamada Mitsuko (Nakayama Shinobu), Chen Zhen's pretty young Japanese girlfriend, they spring to the attack. Wait a minute, were Japanese classrooms coed back then? And I thought teachers were respected in Japanese culture? Well, heck, what else is he supposed to do? He takes them apart without breaking even half a sweat, naturally.

In actuality, this is one of the more realistic martial arts scenes I've seen in a long time. Somebody strikes at Chen Zhen, he blocks and takes the limb out. Bam. That guy's not getting back up anytime soon (particularly the one who tries the kick). The way I learned it, back when I could still almost manage a roundhouse kick, that's what you're supposed to do: take your opponent down fast, and keep him or her from attacking you again. None of that smacking someone just enough to make them back off, so they can hop back up and come at you again. I know it's the classic way to stretch out a fight scene without having to hire a whole bunch of extras. But it's still an annoyance. "Just take the guy out, for Pete's sake; he's already whacked you six times, if you'd just break that arm, you'd have no further problems." Such is my usual laYou know, this bandana thing might work for Bruce Springsteen, but...ment. But not so in this particular scene, to my joy.

This is finally stopped when the teacher of the hot-headed bravos shows up. Funakoshi Fuimo (Kurata Yasuaki) is apparently the finest warrior in Japan, we later learn. It does happen that he's much more controlled than his students, much more civilized. He's also Mitsuko's uncle, and he brings bad news: Chen Zhen's master, Master Wah (going on audio alone, here), was killed in a match with a Japanese master, one of the Noguchi clan. This puts the film on traditional footing; the honor of the martial arts school must be defended! Combined with the themes of ethnic conflict and domination, it is an ambitious project. Chen Zhen must go back to Shanghai, to the school of Jing Woo Kung Fu, and Mitsuko promises she'll wait for him. Ain't love grand? "Mitsuko, I just met a girl named Mitsuko, and suddenly I've found how wonderful a sound can be..."

So Chen Zhen returns to Shanghai, all dressed like a chauffeur (apparently it's the formal student uniform of the Japanese, or something), and is harassed by a clingy gang of child beggars until he gets medieval on their... no, wait, a rickshaw driver shooes them away. He chats with Chen Zhen, and again, the effectiveness of the Jing Woo school is questioned. Chen Zhen shows admirable restraint in not kicking the man's head right off. At the school, a rival master is challenging the school. The current master is Ting An (again, that's what it sounds like), Master Wah's son, and Chen Zhen's best friend. They were raised like brothers. We get to see that Ting An is no slouch when it comes to punting a little derriere, either; who thinks we'll get to see who's kung fu is stronger between Chen Zhen and Ting An? Hands?

Ting An and Uncle Nang (Paul Chan), the cynical grounding character in the film, greet Chen Zhen. As hOwe approaches the Jing Woo shrine, to honor Master Wah, Chen Zhen wordlessly inspires the others with thoughts of resistance against the Japanese. And the music swells... Boy, there's nothing like a little nationalistic fervor. Believe me, I don't just pick up on it in foreign movies; it makes me just as skeptical when I see it in American movies, too.

Chen Zhen goes to the Japanese compound to challenge the man who killed his master. If the man had burned Chen Zhen's pants as well, then there would really be trouble. Some of the Jing Woo students are sent to follow him, but as they're not dressed like chauffeurs, they can't get in. Of course, news of Chen Zhen's return circulates through the community, and the local Chinese police force rushes to the Japanese compound, as well. Again, no spiffy black suit, no entry. Conveniently enough, Japanese martial arts class is just breaking up when the uppity

Chinaman comes walking in. He looks for Akutagawa Ryuichi (Lou Hsueh Hsien), apparently the master who he needs to see. Of course, the students can't be polite, they have to start something.

Chen Zhen is polite at first, merely dealing out devastating blows with his hands, but eventually, things get out of hand, and he has to employ his feet. You know you're in a good fight when the one guy all thirty of your friends are attacking is kicking people across the room; literally. Quite naturally, after a bit of this, many of the students are maintaining a fearful distance. But there's always a few... There are some moves that could be played for laughs, but Jet's not a physical comedy sort of guy. Not that he's above a wry observation or two, but rather than go for the giggle with his martial arts, he keeps it real, i.e. painful and dangerous. Well, excepting the bit with the man's jaw in the first battle, and the Batman-esque no-looking hit in this one. He actually does a whole bunch of Batman-esque moves; there's just something about a stoic guy who's a superlative fighter that they all start looking similar. Give him a cowl and a cape, and he's better than Clooney! But back to the comedy. Let's just say it's rare, and well-timed.

Finally, Akutagawa shows up, and they go into a formal duel. We get the first hints of Chen Zhen's strategic technique, which is based on observation and exploitation of observed weaknesses. He also employs a bit of detective work: Master Wah would have beaten Akutagawa, if he'd been healthy. And then he finishes up, and leaves. The Chinese citizens are massed outside the door, and are surprised when Chen Zhen shows up. Then we witness the arrival of two more characters, the evil General Fujita (or so it sounds, played by Billy Chau), and the John Lennon-esque ambassador (Toshimichi Takahashi). Hey, all you need is love, people.

Chen Zhen goes to great lengths to prove that Master Wah was the victim of foul play, which, naturally, raises questions of who did it. Obviously, it was the Japanese, but the only people who could have delivered it were in the Jing Woo compound. Suspicion runs rampant, but Chen Zhen helps alleviate the tensions. Then he goes through his calisthenics routine, which he learned in Japan. Then he spars with the other students, teaching them new techniques and modifications that he learned in Japan, improvements and such. Of course, he's not the official master, and Ting An is getting a bit threatened.

Ting An finds solace in the arms of his prostitute girlfriend, who he has been seeing for a while, but who he's kept secret from the rest of Jing Woo. Yes, this will be played upon later. And yes, it's just kind of shoe-horned in there, as far as I can tell.

Cut to the Japanese. The General is spying on everyone, even the other Japanese, and John Lennon doesn't like it. This line dancing craze has gotten way out of hand. "There will always be traitors who will try to go against us," is the General's response. Nice comeback, General! Oh, but here comes a drunk Akutagawa, who didn't know anything about the poison, who wants to know the truth. General will do anything for a win. Much like Bobby Knight. Akutagawa gets all upset, as he is a samurai, and the battle with a weakened, poisoned opponent had no honor. Plus, he doesn't like it when the General starts throwing those folding chairs onto the battlefield. Which the General doesn't care about, but when Akutagawa puts a hand on him, that's it. No more Akutagawa. "Let me tell you about samurai spirit," the General lectures the body, in proper evil villain style. "It has nothing to do with honor, but survival, and the total domination of our enemies."

Which, of course, is a total crock. One of the primary tenets of bushido is the acceptance of death. The samurai is not destined to survive, but to die in the service of his master. It's all

about living honorably. After all, isn't that the point of seppuku, a way to honorably end one's own life? The wandering samurai of *The Seven Samurai* aside, the whole point of bushido is to serve a master honorably. There's always that tale of the samurai who sacrificed his life to warn his master that the dangerous tide was coming in: that man didn't value survival over service, and that's a well-respected and honored tale in the samurai tradition. And if you want a good samurai movie that's not made in Japan, don't go to Hong Kong, just rent *Ghost Dog*. I can't say enough good things about that movie, by the way, but before I review that, I have to review *Dead Man*, so just wait.

In any case, I'm just saying that the General is full of it. But he does have that thousand yard stare, so I'm not saying it to his face.

The General frames Chen Zhen for Akutagawa's murder, and the samurai students go to exact revenge. Of course, Chen Zhen isn't at Jing Woo, but they don't believe it. Which leads to another huge battle, naturally, this time with not only martial arts, but katanas and a wide variety of Chinese weapons. A huge mass battle with flashing blades and swinging sticks; heaven, I'm in heaven, which won't end until the police arrive with guns. You don't fight guns with kung fu. As Jet himself helped demonstrate in *Once Upon A Time In China*, bullets trump kung fu.

Still, we have a huge and long battle scene. This is what Christmas is all about.

Then it comes down to a courtroom scene, just like in *Inherit the Wind*. But without the star power, or rudimentary sense of believability. In any case, according to ape law, Chinese testimony can't be trusted, unless it's for the prosecution. Of course, surprise witness Mitsuko makes it all a wash, and the case is dismissed.

However, as Mitsuko is now staying with Chen Zhen, this brings up the racism angle. There's a lot of bitterness toward the Japanese, particularly in Jing Woo. Even those students who appreciate Japanese fighting techniques don't like the idea of having Mitsuko staying at Jing Woo. And it is this conflict which brings up the battle for control of the school. Ting An versus Chen Zhen! Sunday, Sunday, Sunday!

Whoever wins this battle, nobody really wins. I mean, think about it: brother against brother, just about. One is clearly superior, but doesn't want the job; the other has to win to keep the respect of his students, but can't really. It's almost as if Sophocles wrote it. Chen Zhen does introduce this little footwork thing that comes up again later. As Bender might say, "Float like a float-bot, sting like an automatic stinging machine!" The JapaThe Killing Machine aka Snuggle Bunnynese don't seem to have seen his footwork either, so apparently, Chen Zhen's seen some American boxing, or invented the same thing (parallel evolution? Just ask the Yangs and Cohms). This whole fight is worth it, though, to the viewer. In the end, Chen Zhen and Mitsuko leave Jing Woo, forever.

Things get more and more difficult for the young couple, and the General's machinations against Jing Woo just keep getting more dangerous. Ting An finally comes clean with his girlfriend, and she is accepted by the school (they'll take a prostitute, but not a well-born Japanese girl; typical). Uncle Fuimo shows up, as well, to conduct an extensive fight scene with Chen Zhen which really shouldn't be missed, not only for the moves and the neat twist they employ close to the end of the fight, but also because of the sense of fairness and honor displayed by both combatants. And Fuimo is aware of the necessity of warming up before exercise, just like the Vikings, which is never a bad lesson to learn. But it turns out that while he's the finest samurai in Japan, he's not the best killer. That honor goes to the General

himself, the tin-plated dictator whose delusions of godhood (and intense powers of concentration) make him an unbeatable opponent. Can Chen Zhen figure out the weakness in the General's technique? Can he figure it out in time to save his life, or Ting An's? How will John Lennon handle the aftermath? Will Yoko break up the embassy staff?

It's worth noting that the fight coordinator, Yuen Woo Ping, was the same guy who did *The Matrix*, and it shows. Some of the same techniques appear in both movies, and yes, they are just as impressive. Whereas *Matrix* did a bunch of slow motion, *Legend* uses slow motion only sparingly, and tends to speed the action up even more than it already is. This naturally makes it unbelievably fast in places, but it's a basic observation technique that you have to let the fight scenes in this kind of movie just wash over you. You get to see all the moves, but you can't spend too much time trying to follow it; just immerse yourself in it, and let yourself sense the flow of it. At least, that's always worked for me.

Now, there have been very few of Jet Li's HK movies released in the USA where Jet wasn't the hero. Some, like *Black Mask*, are vicious and violent, but that's really the decision of the director and the fight coordinator. Few, however, allow Jet to lose very often. Mostly, he's unbeatable. But then again, with his moves, it's hard to cast him in a losing role. The closest he comes is up against Mr. StoneSkin in this movie, or the master with the Iron Shirt technique in *Once Upon A Time In China*, for example, but in those cases, he eventually finds a way to prevail. Mr. Chow, on the other hand, can have his fingers chopped off and nearly have his eyes cut out, and he'll use the time to get tougher, come back swinging (as in the brutal *Full Contact*). He can even die in the end of the film. But then again, he doesn't have to tone down his moves for his initial scenes, because he does mostly gunplay films, and anyone can pretend to be a poor shot; you just plant the squib off to the side before you film the shot. "This is a little something I call Pee-Wee Fist."

The question in the HK film is not whether Jet will win, but how well and how entertainingly he will pull it off. In *Fist of Legend*, the answers are very and very.

Sadly, the credits did not seem to hold a name I could recognize as anything close to Ting An, which I swear was what everyone called the man. There was a Chin Siu Ho with second billing in the opening, third billing in the credits, who may well be the guy, but his character name is given as Hou, and that just doesn't sound even remotely close.

Now, the rating. The Hoff has no business in a martial arts film. Oh, not that he couldn't hold his own; he's a juggernaut of entertainment, after all. But he would be trying to establish himself in a field already populated with great ones, and it's always difficult to do such a thing. He would be welcome, but we can't say that *Fist of Legend* actually needs him, per se. Therefore, a single Hoff on credit, but a vote that I'd love to see the man in a HK flick. Even if he's just a target...

So as far as Christmas movies go, *Fist of Legend* really helped me get the tensions out. Now I just have to figure out what to buy Grandpa, and we'll be all set. Hmmm...

Precious Moments:

- Chen Zhen's insufferable calm. It's hard to get under this man's skin. He doesn't really hate, even when he's taking revenge; he's just doing his duty. Seeing him get just plain vicious, or all narrow-eyed and coldly hateful would be a good thing. We did see it in *Lethal Weapon 4*, which is a good thing. But then, you'd have to see the rest of *Lethal Weapon 4*, upon which opinions vary.

- Mitsuko's fear of the mouse when she and Chen Zhen move into their new digs. Isn't that precious? (gag, yarf)

"I knew I forgot something when I made this mask!"

- The General's warm-up routine. Doesn't it get expensive to find all those raw materials every time you want to work out?

- Jet's clever use of the belt in his fight. It wouldn't be my first choice to counter the weapon his opponent has, but hey, he makes it work. Puts a whole new spin on locker-room antics, don't it?

- Ko Pui Fong is listed in the credits as the Tea Lady. Pretty much only in HK movies do I see such things. But give credit where credit is due: Ko Pui Fong was most definitely the Tea Lady on this production, and nobody can take that away from her! (by Opposable Thumb Films)

Flirting Scholar (Hong Kong, 1993: Lee Lik-Chi) - This Stephen Chow offering, which has Gong Li as its leading lady, was the top grossing local film at the Hong Kong box offices in 1993. Raking in HK\$40,171,033 in 28 days, it was only financially outdone by *Jurassic Park*, and left other works like *Fong Sai Yuk*, *The Bride with White Hair*, *Once Upon a Time in China III*, *The Heroic Trio* and *Iron Monkey* trailing in its wake. IMHO though, those less financially successful films which I've listed are better productions and provide a more enjoyable viewing experience than what is -- according to Paul Fonoroff (1998:315)-- but one more version of a Ming Dynasty comic tale which was first put on celluloid back in the 1930s.

This is not at all to say that *Flirting Scholar* is completely bereft of laughter-inducing, and even quite inspired, sections. For example, this (re)viewer loved the bits of the movie in which the main character, a master painter, poet and musician (played of course by Stephen Chow): Effectively turned his friend (played by Natalis Chan) into a giant paintbrush and utilized the man's nipples to create painted impressions of flowers, feet to paint clouds and mountains, and penis to imprint the tongue of an eagle(!); and recited a rhythmic rap poem while accompanying himself on percussion instruments fashioned from chopsticks, chinaware and pieces of wooden furniture.

Another amusing scene is that in which the multi-talented but -- at that point in the story -- sad scholar (who is alternately referred to as Tong Pak Fu and Tong Yan), is obliged to make himself smile widely to assure his widowed mother and eight incompatible wives that he is indeed happy with his lot. Ditto re the one in which our hero uses his kungfu skills to make his pulse have a musical beat in order to convince a doctor that he is indeed not in the best of health. And even with my having to rely on what must surely be spuriously translated English subtitles to have some sense of what was being uttered, the distich -- what is that really?! -- reciting duel between Stephen Chow and Vincent Kuk's characters did come across as being rather funny.

So, why didn't I outright adore *Flirting Scholar*? One reason is that like many other Stephen Chow films I've seen, its story -- which, boiled down to an essence, is about a man who looks like he has everything in life needing one more thing, person really, to make him as happy as most people think he already ought to be -- and source of gags is too inconsistently all over the place for my liking. Another is that Sing Jai's main co-star in this work is not charismatic enough to enthrall me (And yes, I am referring to Gong Li here).

A third factor comes from its being so that despite this effort's being graced by old school kungfu movie legends Cheng Pei Pei (playing the formidable mistress of the household of which Gong Li's Chen Heung character is a privileged maid, who also -- as luck would have it -- turns out to be the woman Tong Pak Fu's father jilted in favor of his mother) and Gordon Liu, much of the fight scenes in the film are of the bad -- i.e., ungraceful and unbelievable as well as downright pedestrian -- wire-fu variety. All in all, I'd go so far as to say that this is the Stephen Chow film I've seen with the least strong -- and therefore most by themselves unentertaining -- supporting cast I have seen (despite its not being entirely made up of unknowns; what with James Wong, Lam Wei, Leung Kar-yan, Francis Ng, Gabriel Wong and Yuen King Tan also being in the picture).

This is really a great pity because I actually do think that Stephen Chow does give one of his most appealing performances in *Flirting Scholar*. If only the movie had featured more displays of amazing artistic acts and cute lovestruck looks by its main man, fewer soft-focus shots of Gong Li's face and allowed her to show more acting ability than she managed to do here...Still, this is not to say that I am unaware that some male viewers would disagree with this opinion of mine! (by YTSL of View from the Brooklyn Bridge)

Flying Dagger (Hong Kong, 1993: Kevin Chu Yen-Ping) - Ah, yes. Chu Yen-Ping. If Wong Jing is the king of cinematic nonsense and crap in Hong Kong, Chu Yen-Ping is his second-in-command. Chu will forever be known by Hong Kong fans as "the father of Chinese Nazi movies" with *Fantasy Mission Force*, which strangely enough featured Jackie Chan in a supporting role. He proceeded to make two more movies with evil Chinese Nazis before continuing on to other films. He also was a pioneer in the "Kung Fu Kid" sub-genre, with series like *Young Dragons: Kung Fu Kids* and the *Shaolin Popeye* movies. I must note here that *Shaolin Popeye 2: Messy Temple*, has a scene where a 10-year old kung fu kid drinks milk from a Shaolin nun's breast and starts performing the drunken style(!).

This one of the movies he made during the Hong Kong "New Wave" of wire-fu films in the early 1990s. I thought this was going to be parody of the genre, although it's not quite that. I think *The Eagle Shooting Heroes* comes closer to a parody than this one. However, this one really isn't that bad; it's actually better than I was expecting.

The movie is about two groups of bounty hunters hunting a thief and his consort. The first group is Big Dagger (Tony Leung Ka-Fei) and Little Dagger (Jimmy Lin), the second group consists of Big Bewitchment (Cheung Man) and Little Bewitchment (Gloria Yip). They're rivals, but they secretly like each other. The thief they're after is Nine-Tailed Fox (Jackie Cheung) and his consort, played by Maggie Cheung. That's the general idea of the plot, although there are enough supporting characters, including rival bounty hunters and evil Ming officials, to keep things moving at a good clip.

This movie once was available at Blockbuster Video, strangely enough. The film's distributor also got copies of *The Undaunted Wudang*, *Golden Dart Hero*, and *Slave of the Sword* (a soft-core swordplay movie directed by Mr. Chu himself) into Blockbuster. Two obscure Mainland China martial arts films and two "different" entries in the New Wave subgenre, that's pretty impressive for Blockbuster. Too bad they started sucking after they switched over to DVD.

So the movie is pretty screwy. There's gay swordsman who sings in English (bear in mind this film takes place in the Ming Dynasty), a disembodied hand who's basically Thing from "The Addams Family" transplanted to ancient China, a villain named Die Quickly (who dies after one hit), a villain named Die Hard, another villain named Never Die, a poison that kills you unless

you have sex, and a crazy lecherous eunuch. Oh, Nine-Tailed Fox likes to use his long tails in battle and his consort fights by flying through the air and shrieking like a cat.

All of this stuff might make this film a tough sell, but thankfully there's a crazy over-the-top wire-fu action set-piece every 10 minutes. The sword fights are choreographed by Ching Siu-Tung (*Chinese Ghost Story, Hero*), Ma Yuk-Sing (Ching's protégé), and Dion Lam (*Spider-Man 2, The Storm Riders*). If you've any of Ching's films from the 1990s, you'll know what to expect: qi attacks, lots of people flying on wires, fabrics being used as weapons, objects flying on wires, swords, spinning and twirling, and very little actual martial arts. I enjoyed the action sequences, although they don't quite match up with those that Ching did in *Butterfly and Sword* (which Chu Yen-Ping incidentally produced).

Yeah, if you can stomach the strange humor, this is a pretty entertaining little film. I enjoyed watching these popular actors overact and make fools of themselves while flying around on wires. It's great time for everyone! (by Blake Matthews)

Fong Sai Yuk (Hong Kong, 1993: Corey Yuen) – aka *The Legend of Fong Sai Yuk; The Legend - The Legend of Fong Sai Yuk* showcases the talent Jet Li, the Hong Kong martial arts superstar with the half-shaved head and extended ponytail, whom you will recognize if you have seen either of the first two *Once Upon a Time in China* films. (The Tower has played both.)

Here, Jet shows off his acting talent, with an emphasis on broad comedy, as well as his incredible athletic abilities. In fact, his broad comic persona occasionally seems like a parody of his chief Hong Kong competitor, Jackie Chan.

Jet plays the title character, Fong Sai Yuk, a fighting fool in early 20th-century Canton, who learned kung fu from his no-nonsense mother (Josephine Siao, who is terrific). Sai Yuk is acknowledged in the area as a martial arts master - and no one wants to mess with Mom, either.

They are the film's central characters, a very close mother and son, and both ready to kick up a storm whenever necessary . . . and sometimes when it's not necessary. But the film's non-fighting moments emphasize comedy, as when Sai Yuk tries to help Mom curl her hair, and accidentally sets it on fire!

The film is built around two parallel plots that ultimately converge, one showing us Sai Yuk's romantic misadventures and the other having to do with a secret underground organization called the Red Flower Society, which is gathering forces to overthrow an evil governor.

Early in the film, during a sports competition, Sai Yuk spots a beautiful young woman named Ting Ting and recruits her when his team is one runner short for a baton race. She's not much of an athlete - but she doesn't have to be when Sai Yuk is the final runner. He is, of course, smitten.

Later, we discover that Ting Ting is the daughter of a wealthy patriarch, who offers her as a prize in a martial arts competition. She will marry the first man who can defeat her mother in one-on-one, hand-to-hand combat! Sai Yuk's ego forces him to enter (though he doesn't know that Ting Ting is the prize), and he discovers that his potential mother-in-law is the best fighter since . . . well, since his own mother!

They kick each other, climb poles, swing on long bolts of cloth and even run across the heads of people in the crowd - the fighter whose feet touch the ground first is the loser. Later, Sai Yuk's mother gets into the act, masquerading as his brother.

What follows is a series of mistaken identities and cross-dressing comic romance that would give Shakespeare pause.

And what with all the two central father figures here being portrayed as wimps and the mothers as aggressive kung fu experts, "Legend" may be the definitive Hong Kong martial arts feminist film. (It is supposedly one of the biggest hits in Hong Kong movie history.)

There's no question that an understanding of Chinese history would help in embracing the plot. And there are some things, which are apparently wrapped up in Chinese sensibility and humor, that simply don't translate very well to this culture. (The most prominent example comes early in the film, when Sai Yuk's mother has received a beating by her husband, and it is treated quite lightly.)

There is also a lot of very broad comedy, some of which is very funny . . . but I must confess that a fair amount went right past me. Toward the end, the film tends to bog down as it veers into melodrama.

But before that happens, there is plenty of action, with an amazing amount of eye-popping stunt work, so the audience doesn't have enough time to dwell on its weaknesses.

And yes, folks, there is a *Legend of Fong Sai Yuk II*. Here's hoping that one comes to the Tower soon.

Though unrated, *The Legend of Fong Sai Yuk* would probably get an R for a fight scene early in the film that features a bit of gore, though most of the rest of the film's violence is of the slap-and-kick variety; there is also some profanity. (by Chris Hicks of Deseret News)

Fong Sai Yuk II (Hong Kong, 1993: Corey Yuen) – aka Legend of Fong Sai Yuk 2; The Legend 2 - The first Jet Li Fong Sai Yuk film was extremely popular (came in 5th at the box office for 1993) and so in true Hong Kong style a sequel was on the screen within a few months. If the *Matrix* had been made in HK, we would already be up to part 4 by now! Though the sequel also did quite well (11th for the year), it has generally not been met with anything near the rapture of the original.

It certainly does show some of the faults of a rushed process – a ragged narrative and some odd sub-plots that really don't add much to the film – but it is still overall highly entertaining with some simply jaw opening wire fu scenes. One of the things that I actually enjoyed more about this film is that Fong Sai Yuk shows us his dark side. In the first film, Fong is almost too cheerful – too innocent – but here he grows up and learns to hate – and becomes extremely vengeful.

Fong Sai Yuk has been portrayed on the screen since the early days of film. He and Wong Fei Hung are likely the two most enduring characters in HK movies and each generation has come up with a new slant on the characters. Fong was apparently a true person who lived in the 18th century but very little is actually known about him and so filmmakers have a lot of room for interpretation. According to Bey Logan in his book *Hong Kong Action*, Fong was from Canton and learned his martial arts from his mother. In a martial arts match at the age of

fourteen he killed his opponent and Logan goes on to write that Fong seems to have died in his twenties. Of course, in many of the Fong Sai Yuk films he is one of the Shaolin monks who fight against the Manchus and was present at the burning of the Shaolin monastery. Director Chang Cheh believes that Fong Sai Yuk was beheaded by the Ching rulers.

The very first kung fu movie made in Hong Kong was a "Fang Shi Yu" movie "Fang Shiyu Battle in The Boxing Ring" produced by Sammo Hung's grandparents in 1938. Afterwards there followed a series of films based on the character that continued until the late 1960s. Then in the 1970s Alexander Fu Sheng often portrayed him in some of Chang Cheh's films. Some of these are *Heroes Two*, *Shaolin Temple* and *Men from the Monastery*. Jet Li and Corey Yuen take Fong Sai Yuk out of the Shaolin ranks and instead put him into the Red Flower Triad Society. Of course, in those days the triads were patriotic groups that secretly formed to re-establish the Ming dynasty. In a bit of humor – Jet Li is given the rank of 49 in the society – the lowest rung on the totem pole and in some modern-day triad films this number is applied with the same meaning. A year after the Jet Li films, Fong Sai Yuk was to return to the Shaolin ranks in Ringo Lam's *Burning Paradise*.

This film takes up right after the previous film ends – Jet and Ting Ting (Michelle Reis) have joined up with the Red Flower Society that is headed by Mr. Chen (Adam Cheng). Vying for power is the bald headed villainous looking Yu (Chi Cheung-hua) who is looking for any reason to overthrow the virtuous Chen and turn the group into a ring of thieves. The opportunity comes in a secret message being carried by Samurais from Japan that incriminates Chen. Chen sends Jet to get it, but after failing Jet is then ordered to seduce the Governor's daughter (Amy Kwok) in order to steal the message. Clearly, Ting Ting is not pleased with this set-up. Throughout the film Josephine Siao is on hand to get her son out of hot water – but in the end it is her life that literally hangs in the balance as Jet must turn away from innocence and become a merciless killer.

Much of the first hour is light if not effective comedy - though there are three terrific action pieces that are very pleasing and wonderfully visual. The fight on the river rafts against the Samurais is very clever – the incredible contest for Kwok's hand may seem similar to one that takes place in the first film – but is still an astounding choreographed and epic scene with hundreds of men being used as human ladders and bridges to enable her suitors to reach the top of the tower.

But it is really at the hour mark when this film totally kicked in for me. With his mother tenuously balanced on a teeter-totter set of jumbled benches – with a noose around her neck – Jet grimly puts on the weapons of death and goes to face men that he once considered brothers. He puts a blindfold around his eyes – so that he can kill without remorse – and walks into the waiting mass of naked swords. The killing begins. (by Brian of View from the Brooklyn Bridge)

Fox Legend (Hong Kong, 1991: Wu Ma) - There is a lot going on in "Fox Legend" and much of it makes sense, at least within the context of the movie itself. The impetus of the action is the imminent reincarnation of the Sky God who has been locked in a reptile skeleton for the past 500 years. The head of the fox demons, with the help of her two beautiful assistants, one of whom is her daughter, is charged with making sure everything is ready for the Sky God to be reborn. Her most important duty is to destroy the Wei family, a group who are her natural enemies since they deal in fox pelts and who killed the Sky God almost five centuries earlier. In order to confirm their destruction, she must bring both the Wei family seal and the heart of Shi-lang, the tenth and last son of the current Lord Wei. If things weren't complicated enough

(they never are) the fox demon's daughter and the last of the Wei's fall in love. Romeo and Juliet never had it this tough.

Joey Wong as the fox spirit really has an unfair advantage--she not only has some type of special hypnotic powers, shown by the odd glow in her eyes when she first encounters Shi-lang who has been lured onto her floating brothel but is, after all, Joey Wong. She is able to seduce him by removing his clothing with her hands while also playing a beguiling melody on a nearby string instrument by having the wind blow her robe across it. Shi-lang awakes washed up on the shore and makes his way home only to learn that a year has passed since he went aboard the floating brothel, his father is dead and the Wei family enterprises are in disarray.

The fox demon is no closer to her objectives, her fox spirit daughter having won the Wei scion's heart but having failed to produce the organ. Her main enemy, the Hunt King, has little interest in what is left of the Wei family but is prepared to fight to the death to keep the seal away from the fox forces. It turns out that the seal has magical powers—a fox pelt stamped with it is unable to come back to life. While it isn't made clear the assumption is that those not stamped will return as foxes. Lord Wei's most loyal and effective retainer is Moon, an attractive young woman dressed in silks and with a razor sharp at the end of one arm, having lost her hand to the teeth of a fox.

There is some well choreographed and unusual action when the Hunt King initiates Shi-lang as his new disciple, chanting while attacking with the snare, the axe and other tools of the demon hunter's trade. There is one very quick and funny bit when the Hunt King was in battle with fox demon who is about to use soul magic power on him. He gets into his Taoist approved soul magic power defensive stance then glances at his steeped hands, held in front of the left side of his chest. He does a quick double take and switches them to the right side. It looked like a bit made up on the spot and then left in the final cut. The special effects are on the level of Doctor Who from the Tom Baker days—and escaped fox spirit, for example, looks like a white feather duster on a wire as it zooms around the Wei household, stopping to strangle one of the onlookers. Worth seeing only for Joey Wong and Wu Ma who plays the Hunt King. (by ewaffle of HKMDB)

Forbidden City Cop (Hong Kong, 1996: Vincent Kok, Stephen Chow) - It has been said of family man Wong Kar Wai that he may be the Hong Kong movie maker who seems to best understand and represent (on celluloid) lonely -- but still often romantically hopeful -- bachelors. It may well be equally asserted of the never-been-married Stephen Chow and Carina Lau that in their one cinematic collaboration to date, they have come up with one of the most simultaneously fun and touching portraits of a happily wedded couple to be found in any filmic offering, not least a Hong Kong movie and/or primarily (intentionally) farcical production. And for the record: Yes, this they did in a zany period action comedy sometimes described as a companion piece to the "mo lei tau" (nonsense) king's secret agent parody, "From Beijing with Love" (whose Chinese title literally translates as "Made in China: 007"); and the same one in which both a "flying fairy" "specimen" and kungfu stance fairly prominently figure (along with an evil family, whose faceless patriarch seeks to become ruler of China)!

The full of surprises *Forbidden City Cop* most definitely contains plenty of laughter-, giggle- and smile-inducing sections. Many of these come courtesy of the Chow man being put in the kind of absurd(ist) situations and improbable gadget rich scenarios that those with less incredible imaginations could never have been able to come up with and successfully pull off as well as cram into a movie that effectively consists of two loosely connected episodes: One of which centers on the news and attending of an announced medical conference in the Gum Kingdom

by the Chinese emperor as well as the imperial bodyguard who prefers to be an inventor and gynecologist; and the other of which involves the imperial personage asking his happily married protector to check out a newly-arrived-in-town famously beautiful prostitute for him.

Other humorous moments and prime visual gags come by way of supporting cast members like: Cheung Tat Ming (playing a monarch who has ample reason to be initially displeased -- but later gratefully satisfied -- with the least physically formidable of his hereditarily appointed personal guards); an often bewigged Law Kar Ying (as the hapless sidekick called upon to do such as disastrously demonstrate the mouth cannon...); co-director Vincent Kuk (as the surgeon who attempts to dissect what he thinks is an extra-terrestrial being); and music composer Tats Lau (as "the one who looks like a ghost" and dresses -- and sometimes also sounds -- like a woman). Carmen Lee, who sizzingly portrays the bewitching Gum Kingdom temptress who threatens to ruin the wedded bliss of Stephen Chow's Ling Ling Fat (008) character, also makes some memorable contributions to this tremendously pleasing movie (that has a largely comic tenor but comes with those extreme mood swings and dips into violence and drama that Hong Kong movie fans have often come to take as second nature with regards to quite a few Jade Theatre works).

For this (re)viewer though, the great part of *Forbidden City Cop's* charm actually "just" comes from watching and hearing -- though I can't understand much of what they are saying, I definitely do notice the nuanced cadences of their voiced speeches -- Stephen Chow and Carina Lau's endearing characters making the most of each other's loving company. These two immensely talented individuals -- the former of whom has co-scriptwriting and -directing credits and the latter of whom apparently also had a major hand in the 1996 film's costume design department -- work very well together as on-screen "hubby" and "honey" (Few other duos could make a wrestling match seem so cute and a husband's attempt to successfully lie to his wife be so suspenseful, then funny at a drop of a hat).

Even prior to viewing this offering, I had thought of Carina Lau as being one of the most "giving" of actresses and consequently someone who often makes her co-stars -- not just herself -- look very good (Cf. her pairing with Charlie Yeung in *Intimates*, and her being part of the interesting trio who are at the heart of *He's a Woman, She's a Man*). As for Stephen Chow: While he is a master comedian on his own, he can only benefit from a primary co-star of his vehicles who significantly adds to -- rather than takes away from -- his efforts to amuse but also win over audiences. Considering the abundant chemistry that the pair manifest when together, it seems a real shame that the actress who always has an appealingly mature air about her and the no less delightfully boyish looking -- and acting -- man have not partnered each other at least once more in the years since the making, release and box office success of *Forbidden City Cop*. (by YTSL of View from the Brooklyn Bridge)

Ghost of the Fox (Taiwan, 1990: Bruce Le) – aka *Way of the Fox* - This film has recently been released on the "grey" market legally tolerated release of films with questionable copying license) as "Way of the Fox". When I first saw it I was impressed with what I believed to be a well-made B-movie prototype used for Ching Siu Tung's *Chinese Ghost Story* trilogy. But apparently, *Fox* was produced after the first 2 *Ghost Story* films, simply based on the same literary material. In which case, I must admit disappointment.

Fox is a well-made Action/ Romance/ Adventure/ Fantasy film, with fairly strong performances by all concerned. The story is a folk-tale, about the spirit daughter of the god of foxes, forced into service to the god of snakes, falling in love with a human scholar/ priest who happens to know a warrior/ priest who is dedicated to destruction of all such spirits. the problem is that

Ching Siu Tung's variation of this story, which studies it in detail, is such a magnificent monument in the Hong Kong "New Wave" of the later '80s/ early '90's, one has to wonder why anybody would try to compete with it in such a compressed and low-budget version of the same story.

An enjoyable B-movie on its own terms; try to forget that you've seen it before in better detail. Compare it instead to the earlier, 1970's effort at filming this story, *Killer of Snakes*, *Fox of Shaolin* (w/ Carter Wong), which, if it weren't so slow, would be laughable.

Ghost of Fox is no *Chinese Ghost Story* - but at least it isn't a *Killer of Snakes* either. (by winner55 of IMDB)

Golden Swallow (Hong Kong, 1987: O Sing-Pui) - After the runaway success of *A Chinese Ghost Story*, it was perhaps inevitable (especially in the fast-moving world of Hong Kong film-making) that there would be an avalanche of imitators. Though a few of these releases were successful in their own right, most of them were on the level of *Golden Swallow* -- bland by-the-numbers productions that offer nothing much to the viewer except perhaps a sense of déjà vu and vague boredom.

Golden Swallow's story follows the well-worn path of the relationship between a human and a being from "the other side". In this case, the human is Chau (Anthony Wong Yiu-Ming) and the otherworldly participant is named Suet (Cherie Chung), who would be a great catch if she wasn't a demon whose purpose is to eat men's souls. But the power of love prevails, and the two seem destined to live a happy life together, that is, at least until Suet's master shows up to spoil the party for everyone involved.

There are some positives to be found here. Director O Sing-Pui has a background in cinematography, and that shows up in how nice the film looks despite it obviously not having much of a budget to work with. And though there's not too many of them, the action sequences, which were helmed by Yuen Bun and Phillip Kwok, are generally well-made and fun to watch.

But the rest of the movie fails to make par. Most of the actors seem to be sleepwalking through their roles, except for the comedic relief duo of Eric Tsang and Richard Ng, who go the opposite way, overacting and chewing up the scenery, displaying the traits that make many foreigners scratch their heads when it comes to Hong Kong comedy. Combined with a story that is extremely pedestrian and a lackadaisical pace, *Golden Swallow* isn't exactly a movie that's worth making any sort of effort to track down. (by HKFilm.net)

Great Conqueror's Concubine (PRC/Hong Kong, 1994: Stephen Shin, Wei Han-Toi) -- From what I had read about it, this 1994 Hong Kong-Mainland Chinese collaborative effort possessed similar ambitions and faults as the Chen Kaige directed *The Emperor and the Assassin* which I had viewed - and was disappointed by - a few months ago. Although the idea of a(nother) three hour long early imperial historic epic did not immediately majorly appeal, I eventually couldn't resist checking out the "cast of thousands" - at least in terms of number of undoubtedly cheap extras -- Zhang Yimou executive produced work which stars two Hong Kongers who I feel don't get as many plum roles as they deserve (Rosamund Kwan and Ray Liu) alongside Mainland Chinese megastars, Zhang Fengyi and Gong Li.

In *The Great Conqueror's Concubine*, Ray Liu portrays a general named Xiang Yu whose military exploits and successes earned him the sobriquet of "The Western Conqueror" while Rosamund Kwan is his beloved Lady Yu Gei. Though she spends the bulk - if not all -- of the film as Zhang Fengyi's rival general Liu Bang's not particularly liked - by him and many others -- wife, it becomes clear some time before this turbulent drama's end that the movie's title character is that played by Gong Li. Even while the production contains numerous differently but always grandly staged battles between often intimidatingly large rival armies of men (including that of the then ruling - from 221 to 206 B.C. -- Qin dynasty) as well as martial displays by scary weaponed individuals, the most bone chilling and cunning maneuvers are those enacted by Gong Li's conniving Lady Liu Jeung (who makes Gong Li's "The Emperor and the Assassin" character look like a naïve idiot and Rosamund Kwan's Lady Yu Gei an impossibly sweet saint).

The Great Conqueror's Concubine is one of those films that I can well imagine bringing about a sense of sensory overload in its viewers. This is due to its being so that apart from its being a rather lengthy work, those behind its making have elected to cover -- fairly briefly yet in quite a bit of detail -- a lot of episodes in the political as well as military campaigns of two ambitious men (and one ambitious women) to bring down their land's rulers and jockey for power plus territorial, material and other possessions of their own. As such, it is my suggestion that this four -- rather than the usual two -- VCD occupying saga be watched in installments rather than in one go; since upon doing so, certain sections can be better distinguished from others and appreciated more (Personal favorites include those that took place in the surroundings of the sumptuous imperial residence which a captured Lady Yu Gei was taken to be yet another of the Qin emperor's playthings and into whose dungeons she was thrown into after biting his ear...). Alternatively, I think it safe to state that the two scenes in which Rosamund Kwan and Gong Li share a bath are ones which will stand out for most people however they choose to view this generally serious yet never pretentious offering (which does contain some "only in Hong Kong movies" moments as well as certain "only in Mainland China" vistas!).

As the work winds down to its inevitable - this is a pictorial retelling of amply recorded historic events, after all - conclusion, its story and events get more infused (than previously) with emotion. In particular, the sections filled with song are the most alternately heart-warming and -rending. The final confrontation is also something that moved this (re)viewer (almost to tears). Interestingly, it additionally emphatically reconfirmed that the moviemakers' sympathies are not with the man who ended up founding the Han dynasty and the woman who, after his death, became China's first empress in her own right (a profile of whom can be found on a "100 Celebrated Chinese Women" web site). For at least comparative purposes, I'd like to point out that the feelings I had for their - and others' -- victims is something which the more well known - at least in the West - 1999 Chen Kaige vanity project (the director cast himself as the father of the first emperor of China) never managed to evoke. (by YTSL of View from the Brooklyn Bridge)

Green Snake (Hong Kong, 1993: Tsui Hark) - We've documented in previous reviews how the Hong Kong film industry began to collapse in the mid 1990s. Although disappointing, it shouldn't have really come as a big surprise. Hong Kong had been cranking out astounding films for three decades, starting with the old Shaw Brothers swordsman films of the 1960s and ending with the Hong Kong New Wave in the 1980s. That's a long time to sustain such a high level of entertainment. Preoccupation with the 1997 hand-over to China, video piracy, and the fact that the triads basically bled the industry dry left the once thriving Hong Kong film empire little more than a shell. The talent that had generated all the buzz was getting older, and the new generation of stars simply wasn't up to the task of filling in their shoes. The exploding VCD

piracy market and triad greed caused budgets to shrink to a minuscule level, and with dwindling profits came dwindling quality.

A few brave souls remained to weather the storm, or at least did double duty in Hong Kong and the United States. Director and producer Tsui Hark was perhaps the man most responsible for what we call the Hong Kong New Wave. Films like *Zu* revolutionized movie making in the small island nation, and Tsui's knack for discovering new talent remains unparalleled to this day. As we've gone over before, his list of contributions to the world of film making are staggering. John Woo was laboring away in sub-par comedies and ultra-cheap action films before Tsui Hark fronted him the cash to make a little film called *A Better Tomorrow*. Tsui Hark's filmography as director and producer is more or less the same thing as a list of the most important, influential films in Hong Kong history. *Chinese Ghost Story*, *Once Upon a Time in China*, *The Killer*, *Swordsman*, *Peking Opera Blues* -- this is the man who basically made big-time action stars out of Chow Yun-fat, Brigitte Lin, Jet Li, and countless others.

While you can't overstate Tsui Hark's contribution to the history of film, not everyone was happy about it. A lot of kungfu film purists disliked Tsui's reliance on slick editing and wires to augment his performer's talents, or in some cases cover up their lack of talent. Additionally, Tsui was notoriously difficult to work with in many instances. He would often bully his way out of the role of producer and into the role of director. You have to admire his conviction and passion, but if you're a director trying to work with him, it becomes frustrating to say the least. As many people as Tsui Hark "made" he alienated. John Woo and Ching Siu-tung are two among many who eventually had their fill of Tsui Hark's overbearing artistic passion.

However, most great directors shared these traits. It was Akira Kurosawa who demanded the entire lavish set for *Seven Samurai* be destroyed and rebuilt because a close inspection of the construction revealed nail holes in buildings that would not have been built using nails in the time *Seven Samurai* was set. Kurosawa also freaked out on the set of *Tora Tora Tora* because the paint on the battleships was a shade off the authentic historical color of paint used on Japanese ships during World War II. Obsession runs deep in people that committed to their craft, and it can definitely try the patience of those around them.

When Tsui Hark felt Hong Kong films had become too much about making money and not enough about artistry and innovation, he and a few friends started their own production company, Cinema Workshop, to cultivate film-makers who wanted to break out and try something different. When few Hong Kong film-makers would dare make films with overt political or social commentary in them, Tsui Hark made the fiercely political and downbeat *Don't Play With Fire*. Love him or hate him, there's no denying that Tsui Hark is one of the most important figures in Hong Kong film-making history.

But nothing gold can last, Pony Boy. As the industry fell apart, Tsui Hark was among the many directors who decided to try their luck in America. It was no surprise, really. Hark and friends like John Shum (the frizzy haired comedic actor was also a major figure in the freedom demonstrations that lead to the dramatic and tragic events at Tianamen Square) were outspoken opponents of Communism, and it seemed only logical that they would bid farewell to their home before China took over. Unfortunately, Hark's career in America was short-lived. Like John Woo and Ringo Lam before him, Hark was saddled with directorial duties on a Jean-Claude Van Damme film, only it was much worse because the movie also starred annoying basketball marketing scam Dennis Rodman. As if that wasn't bad enough, Hark immediately got stuck with another Van Damme clunker, this time bearing the burden of the Belgian bumbler and some intensely irksome comedian named Rob Schneider, who was nothing like the handyman Schneider from *One Day At a Time*.

After those two films, Communism suddenly didn't seem so bad. I think anyone who sat through either of those films would agree that maybe a little totalitarian censorship can be a good thing when it comes to Jean-Claude Van Damme and Dennis Rodman.

Hark's career leading up to his departure from Hong Kong was faltering. The comedy *Chinese Feast* and the romantic tragedy *The Lovers* both scored big with critics and fans alike, but from there Hark hit a series of stumbling blocks. His stylish and darkly violent retelling of the *One-Armed Swordsman*, entitled *The Blade* came and went with nary a peep. Likewise, his cynical, downbeat fantasy film *Green Snake* attracted little attention upon its initial release. People simply weren't that interested in depressing, angry films at the time. Since their initial failure, however, both films have acquired fairly large fanbases among aficionados of the genres. Certainly, both films deserved far more attention and praise than they actually received, but at the time folks in Hong Kong just didn't want to hear the lunatic ravings of Tsui Hark.

Green Snake is set in a world between myth and reality. Zhao Wen-zhou stars as a young monk who spends his days hunting down demons and spirits who have crossed over from their own realm into the realm of mortals. Some of them come with malicious intent, but many of them seem only to want to run wild and free in the physical world for a brief time. The monk operates under the notion that the two worlds simply cannot cross paths, harmless intentions or not. The opening scene of the monk chasing an old wiseman who is actually a spider demon through a field as they both run through mid-air sets a beautiful but disturbing tone for the film. It's incredibly lush and over-saturated with dreamlike color. The hallucinatory beauty seems eerie, however, not at all peaceful, sort of like those old fairy tales where things are actually creepy and sinister instead of all bright and Disneyfied.

Monk Fahai is also immediately established as a complex character who is unsure of his Buddhist vows. He is determined to fight against the world of demons (keep in mind that in Chinese mythology, a demon is not necessarily an evil being), yet he also seems to find something fascinating about their realm. Likewise, he wrestles with physical temptations from his own world. On a rainy night, he witnesses a peasant woman giving birth to a child in the woods and finds it difficult to avert his eyes from the spectacle. He also notices that the woman is being protected from the rain, and quickly spies to giant snakes in the trees, serving as umbrellas. His initial response is to dispatch them quickly to the nether-realm, but he soon has second thoughts and decides that since they were helping the woman out, he'll let them slide by this time.

The two snakes are played in human form by the devastatingly beautiful Joey Wong and Maggie Cheung. They are two sister snake spirits who have decided they prefer the human world to their own, and so are doing their best to maintain human form and pass as mortals. Causing them untold amounts of grief is a blind Taoist ghost hunter and his assistants. Unlike Fahai, the priest has no doubts about his holy crusade to rid the world of demons and spirits. He goes about his quest with an unfaltering, blind conviction. Luckily for the sisters, he's about as good at his vocation as the Three Stooges were at their jobs as exterminators or movers or guys who carried around those big blocks of ice. He's a minor annoyance to them, but not a real threat.

Hmm, two snake spirit sisters just trying to make it in this crazy world -- how come Lifetime can't play movies like that instead of those "woman is stalked by her crazy ex-husband while trying to get back the baby she gave up for adoption years ago" movies?

Rounding out the bizarre cast of characters is a young scholar named Hsui Xien who would much rather be drinking wine and writing love poetry than learning the ins and outs of Confucian philosophy. He's the classic "dreamer" character. You admire his idealism, but sometimes you just want him to shut up with his "my heart's so full of dreams" nonsense. And could someone tell me what the hell is the deal with the head rolling? As the scholars regurgitate the Confucian wisdom, they all roll their heads back and forth. I've seen monks and other assorted wisemen doing the same thing in various movies. Now I'm no Confucian gentleman. I've always been more along the lines of one of those drunken Taoists who lives in a cave and gets in arguments with the moon. So I guess the rule was you had to loll your head about while reciting your lessons, but you know if I tried that in school the teachers would tell me to quit nodding off, not unlike how they made me quit reading in "the robot voice" when I was in second grade.

Seriously though, if someone can tell me exactly why they made scholars roll their heads around like that, I'd appreciate it. I'm not above learning some new bit of history.

On a warm summer night, the two sisters sneak into town. Maggie Cheung breaks hearts by dropping in, nude and covered in rain, on a lavish party being thrown by some vaguely Indian guy. She proceeds to stomp mercilessly on said broken hearts with her suggestive semi-lesbian dance involving one of the female Indian dancers. I don't know of anyone, male or female, who's forgotten that scene. Joey, in the meantime, slips into the river and catches a glimpse of the young scholar. She's instantly taken with him.

Did I mention Maggie's suggestive dance?

Things get complicated quickly. Although Sou Ching (Joey Wong) and Hsui Xien hit it off well, there's this whole issue of her being a giant snake. Maggie also attracts the attention of Monk Fahai, who is torn between his sworn duty to combat the spirits and send them packing and his feeling that they are benevolent creatures doing far more to help their "fellow" humans than most of the actual humans are doing. Plus, he finds himself seized by a strong attraction to her, which shouldn't really surprise anyone. Fahai's confusion mounts as he witnesses people wallowing in filth and greed, far more destructive and nasty than any demon he ever vanquished. You could probably have a pretty good fire and brimstone movie featuring Monk Fahai and Robert Duvall's character from *The Apostle*, but you'd have an even better movie if it was Monk Fahai and Robert Duvall's character from *Apocalypse Now*.

Monk Fahai considers the romance a blasphemy. Humans and spirits simply should not interact, plain and simple. He vows to put a stop to the relationship. Obviously, he's focusing his anger on the two lovers in an attempt to compensate for his own feelings of temptation and doubt. It's no surprise to anyone that the most wild-eyed, fire-and-brimstone preachers are often the ones with the most to hide. Nothing fuels a little righteous indignation quite like wishing you yourself could indulge once in a while. Fahai deals with his own guilt by projecting it on others and attempting to interfere in their lives despite the fact that they have no effect on him at all. Like most religious zealots, his divine call is pretty much what the rest of call "dickishness." Face it: it's pretty difficult to get behind a guy whose goal in life is to rid the world of Joey Wong and Maggie Cheung.

The blind priest, on the other hand, is a different type of corrupt religious leader. To him, battling "sin" is just a way to garner more attention and power for himself. It's not about righteousness; it's about career advancement. It's about the rush he gets by forcing his will onto others. Tsui's criticism of religion in these two characters is harsh but certainly not without sound foundation. Whether its nature is of a political or religious nature (if indeed

there is any difference between the two), intolerance is, well, intolerable. It leads ultimately to destruction, alienation, and disaster.

Things get bad when Green (Maggie Cheung) starts getting jealous of her sister's romance. Green was already a bit jealous of the success her sister had in adopting human form. Sou Ching pretty much has it down, while Green still has trouble walking and maintaining her human form. She begins doing little things to sabotage the relationship, culminating in Hsiu Xien discovering Sou Ching is a snake spirit. The shock of the revelation sends him into a coma which only a magic herb can cure. Sou Ching is emotionally destroyed, vowing to do everything she can to shed her spirit self and become a real human. Green, in turn, realizes how her pettiness has potentially destroyed two people, and agrees to seek out the magic herb. Unfortunately for the two sister, Fahai is waiting to trap them and send them back to their own realm.

The whole ordeal is further complicated when the battle between Green and Fahai results in severe flooding. The entire village will be destroyed. Using their combined powers, Green and Monk Fahai could potentially stem the rising tide, but they are too caught up in their own vain battle with one another. By the time they realize the error of their ways, it's far too late, and their efforts to prevent the flood are a failure. The town has been destroyed. Hundreds have died in the flood waters, among them Hsiu Xien and Sou Ching. The final scene of Fahai and Green finally reaching a state of revelation as the world around them is washed away is powerful in the extreme. It's like a punch to the gut, and where most film makers would attempt to tie things up with some glimmer of hope, Tsui Hark just leaves it as it is. In a theme similar to *Zu*, the central characters discover their inability to compromise, work together, and put aside their own petty differences and jealousies has resulted in them losing everything they ever cherished.

Parallels to Hong Kong's situation going into 1997 are not difficult to make, of course. This movie seems like Tsui Hark attempting to come to terms with his own feelings toward Mainland China, a country to which he actually has very few ties (Tsui Hark is Vietnamese). His final resolution is bittersweet, to say the least. China has problems. The blind Taoist priest could easily be seen as the embodiment of China's contemptible past of intolerance and political persecution. If the reasonable people from both sides work together, however, perhaps progress can be made in healing China's ills. It's a message of hope, though Tsui's prognosis for whether or not it will actually happen seems doubtful, at best. He is, after all, a notorious pessimist when it comes to human character.

The acting ain't bad. Though Zhao tends to overdo stoic a bit, Maggie shines. And while she's outclassed by her "sister," Joey Wong manages to hold her own as the coy, innocent Sou Ching. It's a shame she disappeared from the scene soon after making this movie. Along with her role in *Chinese Ghost Story*, Joey Wong seems to be unmatched in making people wish they could just meet a nice ghost and settle down in some haunted temple or something.

The most subversive thing Tsui Hark pulls with this film is wrapping such a bitter pill in such a sumptuous package. Although a few of the wildly ambitious effects fall flat, *Green Snake* is a stylistic triumph. The beauty of every shot, the care that went into making every scene seem like a vibrant technicolor dream, is staggering. Few films are as overwhelmingly gorgeous as *Green Snake*. On that note, you'd be hard pressed to assemble a cast more entrancing and beautiful than Joey Wong, Zhao Wen-zhou, and Maggie Cheung. There's something unusual about all three of them. They're not just physically attractive. Something about each of the actors, even outside their roles here, is engrossing. Constant shots of flowing waters, billowing silks, mists, and swaying blossoms make the film unspeakably exquisite. Likewise, the scenes of

magic and sorcery are breath-taking. There are no martial arts, but there's plenty of flying and summoning of natural elements.

As with most Tsui Hark films, it's possible to overlook the political and social commentary and simply let the grace and beauty flow over you, but you'd be missing out on what makes this far more than just a lovely little tragic fantasy film. If you go into it wanting tons of action and excitement, you're going to be disappointed. After providing us with some of the most wildly over-the-top fantasy action films in *Zu* and *Swordsman*, Tsui seems to be looking for a middle ground here between his early martial arts fantasy films and his later romantic tragedies like *The Lovers*. He hits the nail on the head. With the exception of a few weak visual effects, he creates the perfect fairytale mood: lush, haunting, dreamlike, and ultimately foreboding.

The failure of this film followed by the failure of *The Blade* was a good part of what lead Tsui Hark to seek success in America. Of course, that didn't work out either. He's been relatively quiet since returning to Hong Kong, though there are several projects in the works. Joey Wong went into semi-retirement, shifting her base of operations from Hong Kong to Japan. Zhao Wen-zhou should have been a huge star, but fantasy/martial arts films went out of style, and he found himself stuck in some astoundingly abysmal action cheapies that have done little to establish him as the future of Hong Kong action cinema, which is the title he seemed perfectly capable of inheriting. Maggie Cheung, of course, went on to become an international flavor of the month after some French guy got obsessed with her and developed an entire film called *Irma Vep* just so he could meet her. It worked. The film sucked (unless you really like watching French people talk about making movies as they chain smoke), but the director ended up marrying Maggie, so you can't fault the guy. He accomplished what he set out to do.

And *Green Snake* accomplishes what it sets out to do, which is to pull people into its rapturous beauty then leave them confused and depressed at the tragedy of human stubbornness and greed. As a tragic love story, it operates well. As a indictment of political and religious intolerance and persecution, it works even better. Too bad it wasn't as successful at the box office as it should have been, but then, no one wants an unhappy ending. Tsui Hark was hoping that an unhappy ending in the film would make a real-life happy ending a little more feasible.

Whether or not that's the case remains to be seen, but no amount of politics can change the fact that *Green Snake* is a profoundly affecting, ambitious, heart-breaking story. Even a hardened old curmudgeon like myself has a soft spot for terribly tragic romance, especially if it's between snake demons and flying monks and lazy scholars. Taken as Hong Kong fantasy spectacle or political allegory, *Green Snake* is one hell of a film, and it's the perfect final note for the Hong Kong New Wave to end on. It's only fitting that the man who started it with *Zu* would also signal its closing with this film so similar in theme and (lack of) resolution.

Ironical that the entire New Wave cycle would end up so closely reflecting the events in *Zu*. There was lots of flash, lots of innovation. There was a noise that, for a spell, shook the world and attracted everyone's attention. But at the end of the day, everything closed on the same note of doubt on which it opened. We were right back where we'd always been. With any luck, the seeds of dissent and dissatisfaction continue to burn in Tsui Hark, and he'll surprise us yet again. (by Keith Allison of Teleport City)

Handsome Siblings (Hong Kong, 1992: Eric Tsang) - A young man is brought up and trained by a group of exiled heroes who enter him in a martial arts competition where he falls in love with one of the other contestants. Together they must defeat a scheming villain who intends to become the new supreme leader of the martial arts world.

In the stylistic and comedic vein of *Flying Dagger* (1993) and *Butterfly Sword* (1993) comes *Handsome Siblings*, a visual feast of color and movement with a strange mix of low brow humor and romantic drama.

In this daunting period fantasy, Andy Lau plays Fishy, the son of a powerful martial artist who is rendered a vegetable after defending his friends from Eva, a wicked woman warrior. Those friends who have been wrongly branded as villains raise Fishy and train him in all the martial arts skills they possess over the next 18 years. Meanwhile, Eva has chosen a female pupil to train who is named More (Brigitte Lin). Now a young man, Fishy and two of his guardians go out into the world to enter a martial arts competition which will determine who rules the martial arts world. Along the way, he saves a young man named Yin (Miu Kiu Wai) from the grasp of a seductress (Josephine Koo) and meets More for the first time. All three end up as contestants in the competition, but Fishy and More fall in love which leads Eva to poison her pupil in order to get her to fight. Yin ends up winning the competition by default after conspiring to have his father killed who was also a contestant and tricks two powerful twins into giving him their potent Iced Fire Palm technique. In order to get their revenge and escape a trap set by Yin, the pair cure More of her poison and train her and Fishy in the Couple's Sword stance which is the only technique able to defeat Yin.

With a plethora of humorous gags, kinetic action, and bold imagery, *Handsome Siblings* is certainly engaging. Andy Lau, who has proved himself time and again as a competent star, pours on the charm with a constant barrage of fast-talking wit and site gags. Although this film's central event is about a martial arts competition, martial arts in the film is manifested as all wirework and special effects with a twist. Our hero is basically a mischievous clown who initially hopes to get his hands on Brigitte Lin (literally). He carries around a fake arm that gets ample use (I'll leave the rest to your imagination). Lau's guardians are played by Ng Man Tat and Deannie Yip who also display lots of buffoonery. Like most of her roles, Lin plays it pretty straight, but she's as commanding a presence as ever.

The visual effects and stunts are nothing short of spectacular. Although numerous films in the early '90's shared many of the visual traits with this film, this is still a stand-out effort. The color schemes and lighting are rich and inviting. The wirework and choreography that includes direction from former Shaw Brothers alumni, Phillip Kwok takes this type of action about as far as it can conceivably go and the extreme nature of it compliments the wacky humor well. Easily my favorite visual is when Brigitte deflects an oncoming flying handle with a single drop of water which proceeds to knock Josephine Koo back. Words cannot do it justice.

Not everything is hunky-dory with this film. The dialogue veers dangerously towards the kind of Cantonese comedies that generally leave most foreign viewers scratching their heads while trying to keep up. Some of the humor is doubtless lost in the translation. Some of the humor that isn't may be downright offensive to some viewers, especially the bit about Ng Man Tat shagging a horse while under the influence of an aphrodisiac. Also, the almost non-stop wirework and fantasy effects may frustrate fans of more classic martial arts action. Lastly, the romantic relationship between Lau and Lin becomes a bit corny towards the end. Considering how little the film takes itself seriously early on, it's hard to swallow that Lau would bother to marry a dying Lin, or that Lin could actually die at all.

Fantasy and Brigitte Lin fans will definitely enjoy this film. Don't expect any actual martial arts or depth, but *Handsome Siblings* is still an essentially fun trip. (by Mark Pollard of Kung Fu Cinema)

Hero of Swallow (Hong Kong, 1996: Siu Sang) - Yuen Biao plays the Hero Swallow, a sort of Robin Hood, in this wonderful tale about poverty and corruption which is boosted by some wonderful fight scenes.

Something that makes me angry is when a movie comes out that is so beautiful that everyone should see it, however no one goes to see it. Then a movie comes out a few years later, wins worldwide praise despite ripping off the other movie and wins a host of awards without acknowledging the other movie at all. The over-rated *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* ripped off this classic movie and if you're a fan then you will love this movie.

Sang Sui directs this flawless masterpiece of cinema. Siu highlights issues such as the gap between the rich and the poor and the injustice caused by corruption to the poor beautifully. Yuen Biao stars as Li San (who at night is the Swallow Hero, a sort of Robin Hood). Despite helping the poor, he yearns to find his loved one who was cruelly raped and put in a brothel. Biao, who was born for this movie, gives such a diverse performance filled with anger, love, sadness, and even sometimes happiness. It's really incredible that to this day Yuen Biao has not received one Best Actor nomination from the Hong Kong Film Awards and even the Golden Horse Awards in Taiwan. This really is a terrible indictment on both these awards. Also, Athene Chu, who plays his loved one, gives a beautiful performance filled with yearning, who also deserved at least a Best Actress nomination at the Hong Kong Film Awards. The whole cast is wonderful and complements Yuen Biao and Athene Chu beautifully.

[Lam Moon Wah] choreographs the fight scenes with such elegance that Yuen Biao seems to fight like a twenty-year old. Wu Kam not only brings out the very best of every fighter but also emphasis beauty in the fight scenes. Some of the scenes that Wu Kam directs were ripped off by *CTHD*. Sang Siu includes some wonderful wirework as Yuen Biao flies, walks over walls and exhilarates.

The soundtrack is really wonderful too with the use of traditional Chinese instruments. Also, as this film was filmed in mainland China, the cinematography is beautiful. It really is wonderful and brings out the best of rural China.

Sang Siu and Wu Kam will go very far on the evidence of this. Sometimes a person lives and dies without seeing unseen masterpieces. This is one of them. If you ever get to see just one film throughout your whole life, then make it your goal to see *The Hero of Swallow*. This is a masterpiece that comes only once a generation, if even that. One of the things I like about Yuen Biao is that his movies are not bound by the Hollywood conventional happy ending. This movie has a deeply sad but poetic and beautiful ending. The way Yuen Biao acts at the end will probably never be bettered. I dare you not to cry at the end of this beautiful and emotional movie. (by Rehan Yousuf of Kung Fu Cinema)

Heroes Among Heroes (Hong Kong, 1993: Yuen Woo-Ping) – aka *Fist of the Red Dragon* - As opium smugglers threaten China, a young and naive Beggar So Chan (Donnie Yen) carelessly chooses the wrong side to fight on which puts him at odds with Wong Fei-hung (Wong Gok) and a local commissioner who are waging a war against opium.

Had Yuen Wo-ping's *Heroes Among Heroes* been released early in 1991, it would probably be on everyone's top ten list (albeit at the bottom), but by 1993 doing the 'Wong Fei-hung versus opium smugglers' thing was played out. Rehashing elements of his '80s-era slapstick while

offering more wire fu extravagance, Wo-ping cast his star protégé Donnie Yen as another popular folk hero named Beggar So. Unfortunately, it's the casting of a completely unknown actor as Fei-hung and the fact this project is nothing more than a pieced together rip-off of *Once Upon a Time in China* and *King of Beggars* that makes the film disappointing and mostly irrelevant. Then again, looking back from the hollow, pop drivel of the early 2000s, *Heroes* looks increasingly good.

I hate to knock the incredible Master Yuen or Donnie, but even their pairing can't do much for this film's story. Opium smugglers are ruining China again - snore. If this were a serious treatment of the subject it would be welcome, but not so for another over-the-top martial arts romp. The saving grace here is that the massively talented Xiong Xin-xin is the lead villain who goes toe-to-toe with Donnie Yen. The other bonus is another underappreciated and versatile performance from Donnie. Give the guy credit, in 90 minutes he goes from a snot-nosed kung fu prodigy to a drug addict and alcoholic, before transforming into a more ideal Chinese hero who embodies humility and restraint. And that's just describing his acting. For kung fu excellence, he performs at his usual outstanding level that peaks in the film's final moments against Xiong. He breaks out some great drunken boxing. The only complaints here are that his character isn't as central as it should be and Wo-ping glosses over his return to hero status.

Much of the action is as good as most anything produced in the '90s, but the failure to give it the best context or any originality diminishes the impact. For instance, Wong Gok as Fei-hung is actually quite good. But there's nothing to distinguish him from Jet Li's peerless portrayal in the *OUATIC* series. Wo-ping's *Iron Monkey* remains one of his best films from this period because of its many distinctive fights. In *Heroes*, we're just seeing more of the same with heavy undercranking that gets out of control at times. It's well known that Wo-ping was looking to the West and other genres by this point. Even in the stale atmosphere of this film's action there is a sense that Wo-ping wants to move on, but is locked within the conventions of this period piece. In his follow-up, he returned more completely to his comedy roots for *Wing Chun* (1994) and it proved to be a wiser decision than trying to emulate Tsui Hark and Stephen Chow.

Much of the film's comedy falls to longtime Stephen Chow co-star Ng Man-tat and a false-bucktoothed Sheila Chan as the woman who hopelessly pines for his affections while jealously abusing him at every turn. This is classic Wo-ping humor, which is bawdy and excessive. Anyone who doesn't appreciate the comedy of *Drunken Tai Chi* or *Wing Chun* will simply find their hijinks annoying.

Heroes Among Heroes still has a lot going for it, particularly for fans of wire fu kung fu. Along with Donnie and Xin-xin's fine performances, there's some good stuff to be seen from two ladies (Chan Wing-ha, Wong Sau-ping) who play kung fu-fighting cult leaders. The production values are good and the action is continuous. Wo-ping uses a lot of tight editing that may rile purists, but he does it to truly enhance the action, rather than to simply cover up any actors' lack of skill. Trademark Hong Kong camera work that plows through parting crowds or flashes a scene at an extreme angle is the work of Michael Woo who is probably more responsible for taking this style to the farthest reaches after shooting such maniacal films as *The Blade* and *All Men Are Brothers* (1993).

Fans of more popular wire fu classics like *Fong Sai Yuk* and *Iron Monkey* who still crave more of the same should definitely check out *Heroes*. (by Mark Pollard of Kung Fu Cinema)

Heroic Trio (Hong Kong, 1993: Johnnie To, Tony Ching Siu-Tung) - Roll Call:

Invisible Woman (Not that Invisible Woman) is an impressive martial artist named Ching who has procured a robe that makes her invisible. She uses this scientific miracle to kidnap newborn babies from hospitals for her Evil Master, a eunuch who is planning on using his mystical powers to become the new ruler of China. Invisible Woman is played by the amazing Michelle Yeoh, from *Supercop* and the upcoming Bond flick, *Tomorrow Never Dies*. She is also a complete babe (Miss Malaysia 1983).

Thief Catcher, better known as Chat, is a leather-clad mercenary with a predilection for explosives. She's played by Maggie Cheung, who also portrayed Jackie Chan's girlfriend in the *Police Story* films. She is also a complete babe (Miss Hong Kong 1983).

Finally, we have Wonder Woman. Again, not that Wonder Woman, but one that seems to be modeled on Batman, though Batman has never shown the ability to run across power lines or jump tall buildings in a single bound. Her civilian identity is Tung, wife of a police inspector named Lau. Tung is played by Anita Mui, who is a popular singer in Cantonese, as well as popular actor. Viewers on this side of the Pacific are probably most familiar with her from her roles in Jackie Chan movies, like *Rumble in the Bronx* and *Drunken Master II*. She is also a complete babe (Miss Stomp Tokyo 1983).

Heroic Trio is a gonzo superhero epic in the Hong Kong style. And by the Hong Kong style we mostly mean that lots of things get floated around on wires, from our heroes to babies to motorcycles. We like to think that co-director Chin-Sui Tung walked around the various locations, saying "OK, now what here can be suspended from wires?" and then made whatever script changes were necessary to work in that particular floating prop. Our favorite example is Thief Catcher's flight through a window on a steel drum propelled by TNT. (Kids, don't try this at home.)

Our story begins on a dark (but not stormy) night. In some indeterminate future setting, Hong Kong babies are being kidnapped right and left. Clueless, the police flail about, trying to find the culprit. An invisible visitor (guess who?) informs the police chief that his son is next, and mere minutes of screen time later, we watch the child float out of a nearby window. The child is almost-but-not-quite rescued by Wonder Woman, who approaches the scene by running across some handy telephone wires. She's not content to let her fingers do the walking.

Thief Catcher happens upon the scene shortly thereafter, offering her services to catch the baby-thief for a large sum of money. The police turn down her offer; after all, they've got Wonder Woman on their side. But even Wonder Woman is stumped. What no one else knows is that the police chief has offered Chat the money she wants in order to get his son back, and that Chat has figured out who is behind the kidnappings: the Evil Master to whom she once swore fealty, but has since escaped.

Chat's plan is simple. She kidnaps the next baby herself in an attempt to draw the real kidnapper out. It works, but it also brings Wonder Woman to the scene, and a three-way fight erupts. During the melee, the baby is mortally wounded and Invisible Woman gets away. This is the kind of development you will never see in an American fantasy. There is a whole school of criticism developing here that says that children should never be put in jeopardy in movies, let alone hurt or killed. As a matter of fact, some critics blasted Jackie Chan's *Operation Condor* for its brief pram-in-traffic scene. Needless to say, this school of thought has yet to reach Hong Kong, where babies in movies are used as the ultimate symbol of innocence, and people who would kill babies are the ultimate evil. Here, the accidental death of the baby drives character development in Chat, who rethinks her mercenary ways and becomes a more selfless person.

In any case, it turns out that all three characters' pasts are intertwined, and seeing as how the title of the movie is *Heroic Trio*, you just know that by the end of the film Ching will turn away from the dark side of the Force, ahem, the Evil Master we mean, and all three of the babes will team up and kick some eunuch butt. (According to Chinese movies, males who castrate themselves gain access to some pretty amazing powers. The Evil Master is one such eunuch, as we learn from his womanish voice. Too bad the English dubbed version of *Heroic Trio* used a man's voice for this character.)

There are a few things that set this scenario apart from most fantasy films you see. The first is the babes, but you read about them at the beginning of the review. They're all huge stars in Hong Kong, so this definitely qualifies as an all-star cast. Not only that, but these characters are given fairly deep character definition. Invisible Woman is not merely a woman torn between good and evil, but she is also in love with a scientist dying from his own creation (the invisible cloak). Wonder Woman hides her identity even from her husband, and Chat must fight her fear of the Evil Master.

One of the supporting actors needs to be mentioned as well. Anthony Wong plays Number Nine, a cannibal child all grown up. Wong is an actor of amazing range, almost unrecognizable from role to role. In *Hard Boiled*, he was the suave but psychotic gun runner who owns the hospital. In *Full Contact*, he was the wimpy, ineffectual Sam. In *Untold Story* he played the insane mass murderer (as opposed to any sane mass murderers you might know). At one point we thought there may be more than one Anthony Wong, just as there are two Hong Kong actors named Tony Leung, but no, all of the above roles were played by the same Anthony Wong. In *Heroic Trio* he is totally mute, which seems to be a waste of his talents, though his facial expressions whenever his fingers are chopped off are pretty funny. We guess everyone needs to pay the rent, and that's what Wong seems to be doing here.

Add to the mix an unusual amount of violence compared to American films in this genre. This is a film that features murdered infants, cannibal kids, exploding land mines, and (new! from Wham-O!) a swinging guillotine-device on a chain. Somehow, we don't think films like *Time Bandits* and *Willow* could have ever featured an assassin who ate his own severed fingers.

Nonetheless, *Heroic Trio* is a stylish, engaging film with plenty of action for those of you who tune in just for the martial arts. Folks in need of a plot will probably be happy with the complex set of events and large cast of characters, not to mention the emotional conflicts. If you want action, it's there in spades, and it's action like you've never seen before. Guaranteed. And that's just about the highest recommendation we can give to this kind of film. (by Scott Hamilton and Chris Holland of Stomp Tokyo)

Heroic Trio 2: Executioners (Hong Kong, 1993: Johnnie To, Tony Ching Siu-Tung) - For many HK cinephiles, especially those of us who got on the boat during the mid-late 1990s, the first movie exemplified many of the best aspects of Hong Kong fantasy filmmaking. It was a gonzo superhero fantasy where the protagonists were no-nonsense women (something Hollywood couldn't pull off right until almost a quarter of a decade later), full of imaginative and over-the-top action sequences, bizarre special FX sequences, and just a lot of fun all around. It wasn't so much a martial arts movie, despite having Michelle Yeoh in the cast, as it was just a crazy comic book movie that just happened to have no comic to reference. I'm sure some of you caught this on TNT around the fall of 1997 like I did, which just helped to cement my love for the genre. That was *The Heroic Trio*.

The Executioners is a different story.

Set in the same world, but tonally different from its predecessor, we open with stock footage of a nuclear explosion. We learn that the nuclear holocaust did indeed occur, and the radiation has since tainted China/the city's water supply. A purification system has been developed by the EEEVIL Mr. Kim (Anthony Wong), who just keeps driving up prices of water every time people like Thief Catcher (a returning Maggie Cheung) raid one of his trucks so as to sell the water on the black market. The growing civil unrest at the ever-increasing water prices has government regularly sending people into the radiation-scarred wilderness to find clean water, but those expeditions inevitably end in death, which just makes public relations even worse. But that's what Mr. Kim wants, and he has hired a Christ-like figure, Chong Hon (Takeshi Kaneshiro), to rally up the masses against the government for sending people to needlessly die. The military, led by a corrupt general, hires Inspector Lau (a returning Damian Lau) to assassinate Chong Hon before he can instigate a full-on rebellion. When a second assassin kills Chong Hon at the capitol building on the eve of a negotiations meeting with the president, it all goes to hell.

The general places the blame on Lau and murders him in front of his wife and daughter at a train station. His wife, Tung aka Wonder Woman (a returning Anita Mui), is thrown in prison as a rebel at the general's orders. The general stages a coup and almost kills the president. The Vice President (Eddie Ko Hung) sends Thief Catcher to find water, which she accepts as a way of redeeming herself for bringing the assassin into the capitol and setting all of this in motion. He sends Ching Ching (a returning Michelle Yeoh, although she's no longer invisible) on a mission to take the President's double through enemy territory in order to buy time for Thief Catcher. And Mr. Kim is lurking in the background, waiting for the coup to finish so he can install himself as the President, solve the water "problem", and become the beloved savior of the people.

The first movie was a fun action-fantasy film with some poignant and tragic moments amidst the gunplay, martial arts and flying motorcycles. This is a bleak, dark and ultimately depressing post-apocalyptic action film that has but a few moments of off-the-wall action amidst the constant tragedy. Dozens and dozens of innocent people die in this movie, which is never fun, especially when the point is to show just how bleak things are. I mean, Tung gets to see every person she shares a cell with die of poisoning, after which she forces herself to kill a rat and drink its blood in order to not die of starvation. Happy funville, folks! And how about the scene in the police station where the SWAT team members are talking about how they've worked for three full days without a break and have to spend Christmas away from their families, only for a woman to enter the hall and blow them all away with an M-16 before she blows her own brains out because her husband died on a water-finding mission? Most important supporting characters, even those who are sympathetic, get killed and even one of the main characters, dies a gory, ignominious death at the hands of Mr. Kim in the end.

I suppose I'd be more forgiving of this if the action was good. But Ching Siu-Tung really had his hands full in 1993. That year saw him co-directing this and *Heroic Trio*; directing and choreographing *The East is Red*; and doing action directing on *Holy Weapon*; *Butterfly and Sword*; *Flying Daggers*; and *Future Cops*. I'm guessing it was that fact that led him to focus most of the action around guns, with the lion's share of the martial arts being saved for the final 30 minutes. And even then, the fights are really short and not as satisfying as they should be. There's some nice wirework when Wonder Woman finally squares off with the General in balls-to-the-wall swordfight, and when the Heroic Trio take on Mr. Kim, we get one of those crazy HK fights involving car parts, church pews, chandeliers, grenades, and whatnot. But even that sort of zaniness is offset by the graphic killing of a major character.

I bought the Brazilian DVD of this to be able to revisit the old times and support the local DVD industry, but I really don't feel like making that journey again. Maybe in another 15 years or so.
(by Blake Matthews)

Holy Weapon (Hong Kong, 1993: Wong Jing) - Good Lord. It feels like the patients have taken over the asylum in this totally over the top and out of control kung-fu comedy/action film. The phrase "The Agony and the Ecstasy" fits the bill here with only a slight exaggeration. The agony would be Wong Jing and the ecstasy would be Ching Siu-Tung. The film is primarily a "nonsense" comedy that is all Wong Jing with occasional action fantasy sequences thrown in that are the work of Ching Siu-Tung.

"Nonsense" comedy (mou lei-tau) generally means that anything goes – that there is no real need to tie it into the structure, plot or time period of the film. Stephen Chow is a master of this brand of humor, but it is essential that most of the separate pieces are funny or it will collapse under its own weight and that is what happens here. Though the actors are clearly working very hard to make the comedy work, very little of it struck me as funny. At times I felt so numb from the attempted humor that you could have stuck a pin in me and I would not have felt a thing. I usually enjoy these sorts of crazy antics such as in a similar film - *Flying Dagger* – but the comedy here just left me itching to fast forward to the next action sequence.

Now the action directed by Ching Siu-Tung (*Chinese Ghost Story*, *Heroic Trio*, *Dragon Inn*, *Swordsmen II*) is wonderful to watch. Though it is just as over the top as the comedy, it is spectacular and imaginative and tremendously fun. The film has more wire work than a Boeing 747 and there are probably more miles covered flying as well. At times there are ten or more people zipping around in the air and fighting on wires. Truth be told, it is more kung-fu theater than kung-fu fighting as only a few of the actors are legitimate kung-fu action stars.

One thing that Wong Jing can always do is assemble a first rate cast and he has certainly done so here. Leading off is Michelle Yeoh followed by Maggie Cheung, DoDo Cheng, Sandra Ng, Cheung Man, Simon Yam, Damian Lau, Ng Man-Tat and Dicky Cheung – and Wong allows them to pretty much do their schtick – almost to a fault. Everyone seems to have played these same characters in some other film – and are almost making fun of them here.

Michelle comes out of this the best in my opinion. She somehow keeps her dignity, has some lovely action scenes and has one of the few funny comedy routines. Maggie plays a princess but does little but pout and grin (which is often quite enough for me!). Cheung Man has one fabulous scene in which she transforms into a spider like killer and captures some rapists in her web and then cuts them to pieces – but is otherwise very underutilized. Damian Lau plays the heroic good guy with as straight a face as possible while Simon Yam does his patented bad guy. The majority of the film though really rests with the comedic antics of Sandra Ng, DoDo Cheng, Dicky Cheung and Ng Man –Tat. Never let any of these four be accused of underplaying a scene in this film!

To actually give a true sense of the plot would take more space or patience than I have - but here are the basics. Yam is an evil Japanese swordsman – Super Sword – who is killing many Chinese swordsmen across the country. Lau knows that he can't beat him under normal circumstances and so he has Ng Man-Tat mix up a brew of poison that will give him the powers to defeat Yam, but the poison will also eventually drive him insane. The fight between the two is mind-bending – consisting of a giant crucifix, a Ferris wheel, man-like flying vultures, bodies

crashing together and exploding and the earth shattering. It has all the elements that make this type of set piece so splendid.

Lau defeats Yam – but is not able to kill him and Yam promises to return in three years. Now Lau is engaged to Michelle, but before the wedding can take place he goes insane – parties with some less than virtuous women and kills a number of innocent people. Michelle leaves in disgust and takes on another identity – dressed as a man – and becomes known as “the killer of heartless men”

The three years quickly passes and Yam and his two ninja female killers (Cheung Man and Charine Chan(?)) are back – and Ng Man-Tat tracks down Michelle and tells her that only the Yuen Tin Sword Position can defeat Yam this time around. The only catch with this Yuen Tin thing is that you need seven female virgins to form it. Thank goodness this didn’t happen today! This is where Maggie, Sandra and Do Do come into the film – though they are all trying desperately to lose their virginity – all to lucky Dicky Cheung. This leads to one more spectacular battle as Lau and the seven virgins battle Yam.

That is the bare bones plot – leaving out much of the cross dressing confusions (one funny scene has Cheung Man falling in love with Michelle – “is it edible?”), sexual transmutations, vampires, bodily function jokes, love potions and much more.

This is the type of film that may possibly grow on me – but at least on first viewing I could not get into the swing of things. But for the action pieces alone I would recommend that you watch it – and with a bit of luck you may actually enjoy the comedy as well. (by Brian of View from the Brooklyn Bridge)

Iron Monkey (Hong Kong, 1993: Yuen Woo-Ping) - Let’s just cut to the chase: Iron Monkey is one of the most perfect Hong Kong/kung fu movies that I can think of. Few movies come close to rivaling it. Even though the the first time I saw it was on a small tablet while in a cramped stuffy car on a road trip through the desert, I still loved the hell out of it! And as you can probably guess, I’ve seen it many more times since then. It might not be my all-time number one favorite Hong Kong movie, but it certainly ranks as my favorite wire-fu movie, my favorite Yuen Woo Ping directed movie, and my favorite Hong Kong movies of the 90’s; which is really saying a lot.

Iron Monkey tells the story of Iron Monkey (duh; played by Yu Rong-Guang), a righteous Robin Hood-type hero of the night who steals from the rich and gives to the poor. The corrupt officials are tired of Iron Monkey continually stealing from them and basically arrest anyone who could potentially be a suspect no matter how miniscule the evidence. Two of those suspects include Wong Kei-Ying (Donnie Yen) and his son, Wong Fei-Hung (this time played by a girl, Angie Tsang Sze-Man). However, Iron Monkey appears at the court to prove none of the suspects are guilty and gets in a fight with Wong Kei-Ying, though he ultimately escapes. Now that Wong Kei-Ying has shown his superior fighting skills to the officials, they decide keep his son hostage in return for Iron Monkey’s arrest. It’s good guy vs. good guy. But then it turns to good guys vs. bad guy with the arrival of the eevil Hin Hung (Yen Shi-Kwan).

As you can imagine with legendary choreographer Yuen Woo-Ping, the fight scenes are spectacular. Iron Monkey is a rare film where it somehow finds a way to continually top itself. Every fight ups the ante to a ridiculous degree. Every single fight is memorable, exciting, and often times better than the last. There’s the fight where Iron Monkey first steals from the

officials and basically falls into a house of traps. After that, Wong Kei Ying takes out some thugs with an umbrella. Then he rescues a woman from a group of evil Shaolin monks. Then it's Fei-Hung's turn to take some thugs with an umbrella (Like father, like son). There's a fight between Iron Monkey and Hsiao Hou/Lee Fai which makes use of some weapon work. Then Fei-Hung uses a pole to fight the rest of the monks.

All of these fights build up to one of the most utterly exhilarating, inventive, and over the top final fight scenes of all time! I'm sure we've all seen one of those fight scenes where the characters are forced to balance on a bunch of poles, but this movie takes that concept and adds an extra level to it: Now the ground is on fire! If they fall, they burn to death. Not only that, but then they start to use the burning poles as weapons! Think the finale of *Armour of God* cranked to 11. But wait, there's more! Not only do they use the burning poles as weapons, but now they've been fighting on the poles so long that some of the poles have been burned entirely which slowly eliminates how much room they have to fight! Oh my god, it's amazing! The choreography itself is already fantastic, but they add so many elements to this fight that take it above and beyond. This scene, which is all the more better with the music, also features some interesting cinematography and camera angles. Every shot in this scene looks terrific.

The fight scenes in *Iron Monkey* are already creative and exciting enough to make it a classic, but this movie surpasses other kung fu movies because it actually has a story. A damn good one too. There are clever twists and turns, and every scene builds off the last. There's a rarely a scene that isn't necessary to the story. Thus, the film is ridiculously fast-paced up to a point where it almost feels short.

The film also benefits from its cast. Donnie Yen makes for a fantastic lead; he's often stolid and stern as Wong Kei-Ying and, of course, is a great martial artist. The character development for Wong Kei-Ying is particularly interesting since you can really see a huge difference in his character from the beginning to the end of the film. Looking at his introduction compared to departure is like night and day. Popular Chinese actor, Yu Rong-Guang, is great as both Iron Monkey and his alter ego, Dr Yang. 13-year-old Angie Tsang also stars as Wong Fei-Hung and she does a great job. Her martial arts are incredible and it's not uncommon for her to steal the show.

Yen Shi-Kwan is right at home with his role as the super evil Hin Hung. Jean Wang also appears as Miss Orchid, one of Dr Yang's helpers. It's sadly common for a character like her to be underdeveloped and inevitably fall into the typical "flowerpot" role. However, she does a lot to contribute to the story. A brief but shockingly affecting flashback scene gives a tragic backstory to her character and she even gets a brief fight with some baddies. On top of that, she's also pretty. The presence of Hsiao Hou and other Yuen Clan regulars (particularly Yuen Shun-Yi and Mandy Chan) add to the film.

Iron Monkey is easily one of my all-time favorite movies. Excellent action, a great cast, and an actual story prevent this movie from being just like any other kung fu movie. Just thinking about the finale makes me shake with excitement. *Iron Monkey* gets a highest possible recommendation to people who love kung fu movies, Asian cinema, and movies in general. If you've never seen *Iron Monkey* before, do yourself a favor and see it immediately. You're in for one hell of an exhilarating time.

Notes:

This is another of those Hong Kong movies bought by Miramax for American distribution with a new music score, cut scenes, and redone sound effects. However, this "Miramax treatment"

of *Iron Monkey* is nowhere near as disastrous as other releases (i.e. *Project A*) for a number of reasons: (1) Though a new English dub was created, a Cantonese language option is still available on DVD (despite the sound effects and music still being changed). (2) The sound effects, though modernized, aren't terribly distracting. (3) Though the music has been changed, it's not a horrible score and the music still fits the film. This was actually the first version I saw of this movie and I still loved it. Of course, I definitely prefer the original Hong Kong version, but still, if you haven't seen the movie before, the Miramax version isn't a bad way to go.

This official thread for this movie on the forum is entitled "*Iron Monkey* (1993) is perfection" so it's gotta good, right? (by KenHashibe of KFF)

Iron Monkey 2 (Taiwan, 1996: Chiu Lo-Kong) - Well, once in a while a movie comes out a few decades far too late. It's the type of the genre film that neither plays homage nor updates its source material, but becomes an entry in a genre that has since evolved or died. It's the type of movie that gives you the feeling that maybe had it come out a few years earlier, it'd be more accepted (or forgiven for its problems). But compared to its contemporaries, the movie simply doesn't hold up. I had that feeling as I watched *Iron Monkey 2*.

Iron Monkey 2 was made in 1996 after the "wire-fu" craze of the early 1990s in Hong Kong had already died down. Soon, Hong Kong would be making CGI-enhanced fantasy films and more Hollywood-styled action films to compete on the world market. The "new wave" period piece became an anachronism and no longer brought in the big bucks (Once Upon a Time in China and America being an exception). Ironically, although *Iron Monkey 2* is obviously a wire-fu film, the dubbed version I have hearkens more to the days of the classic "chop-sockey" film. In this sense, it's a chop-sockey film released 20 years too late.

Now, this isn't to say this is a good movie. It's not a good movie in the sense of the word that most critics or even common moviegoers would use. However, it is moderately entertaining, and despite being mauled by fans and critics alike, it delivers where it counts a lot more than a lot of its higher-budgeted successors.

The movie begins with a rich and powerful Republic-era warlord, Jade Tiger, making a deal with some Russians in order to open a club. Some guy tries to kill Jade Tiger, claiming that he stole his land, but the attempt is foiled and the dude is dragged away kicking and screaming (I assume he is "silenced" quickly thereafter). So the entertainment for the evening is a Chinese opera rendition of "The 18 Buddhas vs. the Monkey." Well, these 19 performers are actually assassins led by the Iron Monkey (Donnie Yen). During the performance, a big fight breaks out and after a lot of kung fu, the assassins are forced to flee.

Several years later, we meet another of our protagonists: a young man looking for his father. We are introduced to him by watching him save a bunch of people in a boat who are drifting through some rapids and such. We quickly find out that his father was one of Iron Monkey's colleagues that was blinded in the aforementioned assassination and now is a beggar/(horrible) street musician.

At the same time, we're (unfortunately) introduced to our other protagonists: a young couple of con artists. These clowns live off of scamming people and acting goofy and stuff. The guy really irks me...unlikeable sap. Anyways, the couple gets involved with the daughter ("Mistress" shall be her name) of the dude mentioned two paragraphs ago (the kicking and screaming one), who's offering large amounts of money to kill Jade Tiger. The couple comes

into the contact with the beggar's son, who happens to be a really good martial artist. In a scheme to rip off Mistress, the couple cons her into thinking that their new friend is the Iron Monkey and trying to get the reward money.

Later on, Jade Tiger is about to do some arms dealing at his warehouse, but the truck carrying the guns is attacked by Iron Monkey. The threesome go to the warehouse too and soon the beggar's son is fighting against Iron Monkey. At the same time, the con artists steal the guns and run off. Interestingly enough, instead of turning them over to Mistress and getting some reward, they give them to Jade Dragon in exchange for jobs at his club.

A quick side note. The name of Jade Tiger's club is "Club." How original. I would've expected the club to have a Chinese name. Heck, it was financed with the Russians so even Russian name would've made more sense. But Club? Come on now!

Anyways, the beggar's son (I forget his name) and the Mistress find out they've been duped by the couple. The son decides to drink away his problems and in spite of Mistress's attempt to hire him to help her, he refuses. He does get into a big fight with Jade Tiger's cohorts, though.

While that's going on, the con artists are now working as waiter and singer at the "Club." However, after being humiliated by some Japanese patrons, the couple leave, get into an argument, and part ways. This is probably the closest the movie comes to having a moral. In this case its that a preoccupation with money destroys lives and relationships. The cynicism of the male con artist drives away his companion and love.

Iron Monkey reappears on the scene, once again in disguise as the brother of one of the dudes he offed in arms raid. Whatever he's trying to accomplish in his "visit" with Jade Tiger is foiled by the appearance of the dude he supposedly offed(!) who blows his cover. A fight breaks out between Iron Monkey and Jade Tiger's men and then with Jade Tiger himself. Iron Monkey escapes but the blind beggar, who was present too, is shot to death.

Upon learning of his father's death, the son goes ballistic and upon finding one of Jade Tiger's four bodyguards, beats the guy to death. The son and the girl con artist than team up to steal Jade Tiger's weapons cache. They're successful, although the girl is killed in the fracas.

By this time, Jade Tiger has brought his brother (Billy Chow) into the mix to help him against Iron Monkey. We're treated to one scene where Billy Chow randomly beats some dudes to death and has that exit where he blows something up and walks in slow motion with explosion behind him. It's an interesting scene.

The son and the guy con artist give the guns that they recovered to Iron Monkey, who from there will move them south. They then decide to infiltrate the "Club" and deal out some kung fu justice to Jade Tiger and his men. And as can be expected, Iron Monkey appears as well and all kung fu mayhem breaks loose!!

First, our classic kung-fu check-off list:

1. Appearance of low budget: check.
2. Use of historic anachronisms: check.
3. Fights that seem to break out for no reason: check.
4. Racist portrayal of Japanese: check.
5. "Bad" dubbing: check.
6. Scenes of bad guys randomly attacking innocent bystanders: check. check.

7. Period setting: check.
8. Use of music from American movies: check (this time it's from True Lies)
9. Excessive use of the word "bastard": check.
10. Mistaken-identity subplot: check.

Yup, this is indeed old school chop-sockey released two decades after it should have. I gave away most of the story mainly because it's presented in such a disjointed manner that really isn't that important. For example, after the beggar's son saves Mistress at the restaurant, he character disappears for the rest of the movie. There are four scenes that are basically random acts of violence against people that really don't have much rhyme or reason to them.

In all honesty, however, I could easily live with a kung fu movie with a disjointed plot. I loved *Young Hero of Shaolin Part 2*, which consisted of almost nothing but random fight scenes. That's no problem for me. This movie, however, does something that I dislike: allow the non-action scenes to be carried by annoying supporting characters.

In this case, it's the con-artists who carry most of the story scenes. Anyways, the con artists (especially the guy) are annoying and irritating. A lot of Hong Kong movies are guilty of filling in the gaps between fights with idiotic humor. *Yes, Madam* is probably worst culprit. I mean, how can you have movie starring Michelle Yeoh and Cynthia Rothrock, and then have three supporting stooges take up most of the middle of the movie. Maybe it happens whenever you have a thin plot and need some filler in between the fight scenes. This is another example.

So if the con artists are the major characters, where does that put Donnie Yen? Well, that puts him in a secondary role as a supporting good guy. By that, I mean that he just appears on screen every now and then to get into a random fights with the bad guys. His character is written to only have one dimension to it, if that.

The bad guys are an interesting bunch. In all honesty, Jade Tiger is really a bland villain. He's not even all that villainous, or at least he doesn't come across as being really cruel and despicable. His right-hand men are more imposing than he is. Two of his bodyguards are Caucasian and two are Chinese. One Caucasian wears a cowboy hat and uses a gun. The other wears a bad wig, an eyepatch, and uses a gun. Out of the Chinese guys, one has a birdcage that turns into a flying guillotine-esque weapon and the other looks like a carrot (his hairstyle) and can kick really good. They too are bland, but at least their appearance is quirky...kind of.

The VHS cover I have gives Billy Chow (*Fist of Legend*, *Dr. Wei and the Scripture with No Words*) second billing. This must've been on account of his relative star power (compared to the rest of the no-name cast). However, it's a case of deceptive advertising as he doesn't come in the movie until the last act. We first see him making a deal with Jade Tiger, then he kills a bunch of people in a random scene, and then he fights the protagonists in the climax.

So we have a messy plot and bland characters. This doesn't mean that the movie is necessarily bad or unwatchable, it just means that the movie from this point forward will rest on its fight scenes. I'm happy to say that this film delivers, thanks to a fairly talented cast and Yuen Woo-Ping's direction.

I'm not sure what the story is with Yuen Woo-Ping and his involvement in this film. I've heard different stories. The opening credits list him as the fight choreographer. However, I've read one account that says that Donnie Yen signed on the film since Yuen was working on it, so he did out of respect for him. I also heard that Donnie Yen and Yuen Woo-Ping clashed on set and the latter left the film, and Donnie kept his name on the credits. Or something. In any case, the

fighting is of a pretty good calibre, which is most important.

Being a period-piece of the 1990s, there's a fair amount of wire fighting to be expected. The usual tricks are there: flying bicycle kicks, no-shadow kicks, kicking up floorboards, high jumps, etc. For the most part everything is executed pretty well (i.e. there were no glaring problems in the use of wires). The wire FX were certainly better than those of *The Medallion* and such. As is typical with most movies with Donnie Yen, there's a lot of undercranking. I didn't find it all that distracting. It's there and noticeable, don't get me wrong. It was a lot more jarring in *Crystal Hunt* than in this film.

As usual, the Chinese excel at object-driven combat...filming it, that is. In this movie, Yuen Woo-Ping and company provide us with fights involving spears, swords, rope-darts (I love fights involving those), ladders, carts, flying guillotine-esque bird cages, guns, logs, ropes, killer Chinese cloth (anyone who's familiar with the genre knows about that), poles, etc. The last fight is very inventive, in which our heroes take on the villains in the "Club," which is being renovated. As another reviewer commented, they really do bring the house down. Also, watch for a fight where Donnie takes on the beggar's son in a lumber yard--for those of you who like more technique-driven combat, Donnie does some excellent wing chun in this fight.

You may have noticed that I didn't make much (if any) mention to the connection between this film and the first. The reason is that there is no connection. Heck, even the Chinese names of the movies have nothing in common*. The first movie is set in the Qing Dynasty during the 1860s (or so) and is a prequel to the *Once Upon a Time in China* series. This movie takes place in the Republic era of the 1920s or so. The Iron Monkey in this movie is different from his counterpart of the last century. The greatest difference was that the original Iron Monkey looked like a ninja. Donnie Yen, when not in disguise, has black outfit, black cape, and a very silly gold helmet to wear. Luckily, scenes with him in that embarrassing get-up are few and short.

I suspect that Donnie did this film in order to pay the bills. He said about some of the low budget films from the early 90s that he took part in. I can't imagine his artistic vision translating into this film, although he might've brought it to the fights, had Yuen Woo-Ping really left the project. Whatever the case may be, if you like good ol' fashioned old school butt-whooping, than this movie is worth at least a rental.

*- The Chinese name of this movie translates into something along the lines of "First Killing Fist in the Street" or "Best Deadly Street Fighter" or something along those lines. (by Blake Matthews)

Justice, My Foot (Hong Kong, 1992: Johnnie To) - A Qing-era defense lawyer known for his quick wits (Stephen Chow) and his pregnant, martial arts-fighting wife (Anita Mui) stand up to corrupt, flatulent officials in an effort to defend a woman wrongly accused of murdering her husband.

There's something about fart jokes that transcends language barriers, even as much of Stephen Chow's nonsensical, Cantonese witticisms often do not. *Justice, My Foot!* is a generally amusing effort with a healthy mix of Chow's shenanigans and action director Ching Siu-tung's slick wire fu. But like most of Chow's early films, the comedy is wrapped up into fast-moving, colloquial dialogue and situations that will baffle many Western viewers.

The film is a parody of both courtroom dramas and Qing-era period pieces that follows Chow's

well-used formula of a talented jerk falling flat on his face and rising up to meet the challenge as a more humble being. But this time, the formula is not as well-defined or as entertaining as in later works like *The God of Cookery*. Chow plays a celebrated criminal defense lawyer named Sung Shih-chieh who retires from guilt over his successful defense of the guilty and the accidental death of his infant son. While this may not seem like much of a comedy, Chow displays a knack for riding the line between nonsense and drama. Sung is soon drawn out of retirement after his sassy wife (Anita Mui) comes to the defense of a woman framed for murdering her husband. But just as the trial begins, a corrupt official (Ng Man-tat) has Sung arrested for contempt of court. On his way to jail, Sung is nearly skewered by assassins hired by the real killer (Yuen King-tan), but is rescued by his kung fu-fighting wife, her two servants, and a martial arts hero caught up in the struggle (Eddy Ko Hung). Sung pretends to go insane in order to get released from prison and after recovering vital evidence returns to the trial which is now presided over by a weak-kneed Inspector General (Paul Chun) and three corrupt magistrates all guilty of ignoring or covering up the murder.

As a comedy, *Justice, My Foot!* relies heavily on the dialogue which doesn't do non-Cantonese-speaking viewers much good. Seasoned Chow fans and Hong Kong movie viewers will pick up on some of it, but the film just isn't as funny or easy to follow as Chow's more recent films. But the film is far from a lost cause. Chow is at his best when spontaneously beating a client while making Bruce Lee yelps or buying elevated kung fu shoes in order to look down on his wife who is normally taller than he is. More visual, or audible gags are generally base, but undeniably funny. Highlights include Chow's homely maid (Mimi Chu) who stuffs her petticoat with a pair of water balloons, a reference to *Silence of the Lambs*, pictures of Chow's parents who look suspiciously alike apart from a wig, and the simple sight of a pair of guards, one tall and thin matched with one short and fat. Chow also pokes fun at a pair of homosexual men and tosses his kid's dirty diaper on a guard's face. The topper is Ng Man-tat's chronic flatulence that gets better when Leung Kar-yan chimes in with perfect comic timing. Ah, yes. Nothing but highbrow entertainment here.

Chow and Anita Mui make a great screen couple with Mui delivering another standout role as Chow's feisty wife. Her main gag is that she's this pregnant woman with great kung fu skills who repeatedly has to come to her poor husband's defense. This is where Ching Siu-tung's excellent wire fu action comes in. My favorite moment is Mui's light step kung fu display as she barely lands her foot on a jiggling cube of bean curd that is being held aloft by a vendor. There are several decent wire fu battles involving Mui and longtime Ching Siu-tung associate Eddy Ko Hung who plays a stereotypical kung fu hero. Ching is truly the master of making non-fighters look good onscreen and Mui becomes the perfect picture of martial grace and fierceness despite limited training. Vividly-lush cinematography from award-winning DP Peter Pau also provides a big boost to the film's look while director Johnnie To proves to be just as capable of doing comedy as he is action.

A story less-focused on Chow's verbal sparring in the courtroom would have been nice, particularly in the end, but *Justice, My Foot!* manages to remain engaging and consistently peppered with just enough stylish action and slapstick. (by Mark Pollard of Kung Fu Cinema)

Kick Boxer (Hong Kong, 1993: Wu Ma) - After the first thirty minutes of Kickboxer, it becomes obvious that this film would never have existed were it not for Tsui Hark's *Once Upon A Time In China*. The film seems to entirely unfold in the movie universe created in Hark's masterpiece. Along with borrowing some of Hark's visual style, there are pissy ponytailed gwaillos who prove to be a problem, and a daughter of a local police chief who looks amazingly like Rosamund Kwan's cousin Yee (she even has one of the those cameras), and much of the costumes are the

same (Yuen in one scene wears the round glasses and hat that Jet Li made famous). All these elements might be an attempt at parody that was completely lost on me.

Never fear though, this is a Yuen Biao movie after all. This isn't the Jean Claude Van Damme pile of crap that you catch on the Superstation every other week. Eventually, we get to what he does best, which is comedy and ass kicking. Biao's Zhai arrives at Po Chi Lam School to train under the legendary Wong Fei-hong. Master Wong is gone on a trip and Zhai must contend with his other followers as he learns the ropes.

Chaos awaits. Just about everything Zhai does backfires somehow, causing comic unrest in the rest of the group. This is a source of frustration for me, because in the many attempts at humor, Zhai is considerably dumbed down and not just naïve, only to be smartened up quickly when the story needs him to be.

Nonetheless, Zhai gets himself mixed up with an opium trader played by Yuen Wah. To clear his name, he infiltrates Wah's gang and works with the police chief played by Wu Ma (I think it's him, not completely sure), who is wonderful as a no-nonsense cop. The cop also dons a pair of metal slippers that serve him well in the various fights.

The fights are what you would expect. Fast, skillful, and acrobatic. Never boring. Unfortunately, a couple bouts unfold in dim lighting. I will continue to be confounded by these movies of decent budgets wasting film on murky fight scenes. But on the whole, there is plenty of eye-popping kung fu to go around. Catch another classic Yuen Biao-Yuen Wah duel here and know that these guys are at their best when pounding each other mercilessly with fists and feet.

Clearly one of the many under-rated little gems that Yuen Biao has packed quietly away into his filmography. (by Reefer of City on Fire)

King of Beggars (Hong Kong, 1992: Gordon Chan) - An illiterate, but wealthy young man is forced to become a beggar after it's discovered he cheated on an exam to become the royal 'Kung Fu Scholar.' Joined by his father, who has lost his post as General of Canton, So Chan (Stephen Chow) all but gives up on life until he is given the opportunity to become 'King of Beggars' and stop a plot to kill the Emperor.

Following the modern-day martial arts comedy *Legend of the Dragon*, Stephen Chow leapt into the wire-fu frenzy that dominated the early '90s in Hong Kong. With choreography by Yeun Cheung-yan and direction by Gordon Chan (*Fist of Legend*, *The Medallion*), both of whom have worked with Chow previously, *King of Beggars* is a large scale costumed affair with outrageous action and an epic story. Chow's comic touches get a little lost in the shuffle of spectacle, but this proves to be an advantage as the story remains the main attraction.

Chow plays a popular folk hero of China named So Chan, AKA Beggar So. This character has appeared in film numerous times, with Donnie Yen's performance in Yuen Wo-ping's *Heroes Among Heroes* (1993) being one of the more notable. So Chan starts out as the son of the wealthy General of Canton, played by Chow's longtime acting partner Ng Man-tat (*Shaolin Soccer*, *The God of Cookery*). He's great at kung fu, but lazy and illiterate like his father. If ever there was a better example for kids to stay in school, this is it. Bewitched by the lovely Yu-chang (Sharla Cheung), So decides to prove his worth by entering a competition to choose the next 'Kung Fu Scholar.' Only the brightest and most adept martial artists stand a chance. So

Chan barely overcomes a grueling test of martial skills, but has his hopes dashed when its discovered that he not only cheated on the written exam, but cannot even write his own name. The Emperor takes away everything in the So family estate and makes a decree that So and his father shall be beggars for the rest of their lives.

A new chapter in So's life begins as he's faced with the hardships of finding food. He makes the mistake of performing kung fu to make money and has his hands and legs broken by a vicious and ambitious official named Chiu (Norman Chu). Wounded, sick, and reduced to eating dog's food, So and his father get a second chance when they meet Yu-chang who invites them to join the Beggar's Association. This group is made up of homeless patriots who are aware that Chiu is plotting to kill the Emperor and take his place. But before they can act, they must choose a new leader. So, Chan becomes that man after learning a sleeping kung fu technique from Yuen Cheung-yan, who plays another beggar. After Yu-chang is taken prisoner by Chiu and forced to be his assassin, So Chan and his followers rush to where the Emperor and his troops are camped. Chiu releases deadly 'unicorn gas' that decimates the Imperial forces, leaving So Chan and his fellow beggars to save the day.

Despite its offering of few real laughs, *King of Beggars* is still an entertaining film. The action features heavy wire use that is as energetic and spastic as just about any HK wire-fu picture. Norman Chu does his menacing evil song and dance with the usual high level of proficiency. You can expect to see him fly through the air like a rocket, lop off heads, and drink the blood of infants, all without being gratuitous. This is a comedy after all! The square-jawed Sharla Cheung (*Fight Back to School*, *Royal Tramp*) has never been one of my favorite leading ladies, but she does alright opposite Chow and also delivers a few kung fu moves. She is still one of Chow's least interesting female co-stars, perhaps due to a lack of artificial deformity, a comic element Chow has taken to in his more recent films.

Chow himself delivers a good performance, more so on the dramatic side. Some of his long-running gags like the nose-picking transvestite are in place, but these jokes seem isolated and lose much of their comedic impact. The one exception is the kung fu scholar competition. Chow is in top form as he floors opponents and immediately follows with macho mugging to the audience. Here he also sneaks in another Bruce Lee tribute with nunchakus. Most of the other jokes seem like prototype versions of what he would come to perfect in successive films. Beyond the comedy, Chow seems quite comfortable with the role and infuses the character with a lot of personality. One of Chow's gifts is the ability to teeter between a snobby and obnoxious ass and a sensitive and likable hero. He makes both character traits work for him. The one aspect that was a little disappointing was his kung fu work. He's not a martial artist, but he is quite flexible. Much of his martial arts in the film is portrayed as a supernatural skill, such as the sleeping kung fu. In addition, he learns this style while dreaming. So, Chow and the filmmakers basically gloss over the martial arts aspect of the film. Also, aside from the competition, there isn't much comedy mixed in with the action. The sleeping kung fu stuff sounds better than it actually is. As one of Chow's most involved wire-fu films, this seems like a missed opportunity to lampoon the genre.

The final battle is also a let down. There are a load of extras to form impressive armies, but the lame use of deadly gas basically solves the problem of having to choreograph a large battle. The only real fight takes place near the Emperor's tent and its all excessive wire-fu nonsense and last-minute scrabbling to figure out an esoteric 18th stance to finish off Norman. The real fun in this film is not the action, but watching Chow's character fall and slowly regain his self respect. Its a formula he uses time and again to sell his films and admittedly it works as long as he keeps coming up with new twists.

King of Beggars is a solid period offering from Chow with a fair share of broad humor, drama, and wire-fu action. Its more well-rounded and easier to follow than his slapstick *Royal Tramp* films. But some viewers may still be put off by the occasionally juvenile comedy unevenly mixed in. (by Mark Pollard of Kung Fu Cinema)

King of the Sea (Hong Kong, 1994: Cheung Gwok-Ching) - Back in the early 1990s, dozens of movies were being made, most of which were either about Jet Li's quest to portray every Chinese folk hero in existence, or about Ching Siu-Tung dropping acid and saying, "Let's do a *wuxia* film!" The rest were made up of movies trying to copy those two types of movies. While most of those movies have become available to kung fu fans everywhere on DVD, this particular film apparently was overlooked, having gotten a little lost in the ruckus. It was available on VHS from Tai Seng Video (the go-to place for Asian cinema before American distributors started getting in on the action) for a while, but sometime around the end of the last decade, Tai Seng either changed their business model or dropped out of the game altogether and the film became even *harder* to find. But I was able to score a copy from a friend and here I am reviewing it to you.

The movie is set during the Ching Dynasty circa the late 1800s, when the foreigners were pouring into the China and treating everybody around them like second-class citizens. Moreover, the British were involved in opium selling, turning in huge profits while destroying families and promoting addiction. I know a lot of reviewers complain about the opium angle being used too much in these movies, but this is only the fourth film I've seen this in (the others being *Martial Arts Master Wong Fei Hung*; *Tai Chi II*; and *Heroes Among Heroes*). The movie proper opens with a family fishing out at sea. Their boat is ran over by a British cruise ship. In one of the goofiest anti-foreigner moments I've seen in a film like this, the captain asks if his ship is okay, ignoring the fact that three Chinese people have been left to drown. The kid, Bo Chi (who'll be played as an adult by Conan Lee of *Ninja in the Dragon's Den*) is rescued by some Robin Hood-esque pirates, who raise him and teach him kung fu.

Years later, Bo Chi is an adult and a powerful kung fu fighter. He kinda likes his "older sister" (Cecilia Yip), but she's been betrothed to Bo Chi's foster father, who's already an old man. Bo Chi's being favored by foster dad angers Po Ta (Ken Low, of *Mahjong Dragon* and *Drunken Master II*), the half-Japanese pirate who's practically Bo Chi's brother. Whatever. There's a raid on a British opium ship that is successful, save the part where a woman in a nice Western dress stabs foster dad to death. Bo Chi and Elder Sister/Stepmother are put in charge of the pirates, much to Po Ta's chagrin. Their first course of action is to use their treasure to buy up huge quantities of rice and distribute it to the poor.

Meanwhile, the head of the East Indies Company is complaining to the local Mandarin about his ships being ransacked. This leads to a priceless scene where the Ching official and businessman are talking to each other via an interpreter. At the end of his spiel, the Englishman curses the official with a good ol' "F*** you!" Suddenly, the official starts speaking in English, telling the foreigner that he'll go after the pirates when he darn well pleases, ending his speech with, "Oh, and one more thing: F*** you too!"

Bo Chi and his team decide to invade the East Indies company building to figure out what the shipping schedule is. While this is going, Bo Chi stops by a brothel and falls in love with the newest prostitute, whose virginity is being sold to the highest bidder. He rescues her from the lecherous old man who won the auction, although she distrusts him as much as she does the john who bought her. Not the one to give up, Bo Chi asks his Elder Sister/Stepmother for

enough money to buy the woman out, despite the fact that Stepmother is still in love with Bo Chi. Bo Chi goes to the brothel and beats everybody up before finding the girl, who's been bloodied up by her latest john. He takes her in and marries her, although their honeymoon doesn't last long.

While all this was going on, Pa To had joined another group of pirates, who wish to take Bo Chi out of the equation. They stage a raid on Bo Chi's headquarters, and a big fight ensues. Said fight is broken up by the sudden appearance of Ching Soldiers. A lot of people die, yadda yadda yadda. Then we get to the end, which is kind of bizarre. The Ching Official from a few paragraphs up was himself against the opium dealers, but made a deal with the Englishman that if he would kill the pirates, the English would stop bringing opium into China. The Englishman lied, of course, because he's an evil foreigner, you know. This leads to a naval battle between the Ching fleet and a single British warship. The Chinese ships are brutally massacred by superior Western firepower. Admiral Kick-a-Puppy even opens fire on civilian boats filled with farmers. Finally the pirates show up and lead a raid on the warship. Chinese patriotism prevails again!

It goes without saying that the *Once Upon a Time in China* series is the quintessential series of kung fu movies that Hong Kong made in the 1990s. One might refer to the faux-prequel, *Iron Monkey*, as being its child. The movies *Heroes Among Heroes*, *Kick Boxer*, and *Fist from Shaolin* might be considered its cousins. The low-budget *Martial Arts Master Wong Fei Hung* could be thought of as the Milhouse to *OUATIC*'s Bart Simpson. *Last Hero in China* would be the Uncle Buck of the family. *King of the Sea*, in final analysis, would be the pathetic screw up of the classroom that would like to be like *OUATIC*, but is too much of a sleaze to pull it off. This is easily the sleaziest of the 90s "New Wave" movies I've seen. Prostitution is a big part of the story. There's a random scene early on where we see some men selling their daughters into prostitution (run by some British guy). When the girls are presented to said Englishman, he forces one girl's head into his lap and sodomizes another. While it's not extremely explicit in its presentation, it's uncomfortable and exists only to remind us how EEEEEEEEEVIL the foreigners are.

Unfortunately, the film's sleaze and racism aren't its only faults. The action, brought to us by the...*cough*...great Lam Moon Wah is rather lackluster, too. Lam Moon Wah is best known for working with big actors on their lesser projects, like the guy you go to when you don't have enough money for a choreographer with the last name of Yuen. The man's work is horribly inconsistent. Few people have anything good to say about the action in *Killer of Snakes*, *Fox of Shaolin*, but the finale to *The Club* is considered one of the greatest Hong Kong action scenes ever. The man did stellar work in *Hero of Swallow* and *Young Hero of Shaolin II*, but nobody seems to care about his work in the late Shaw Bros. film *Journey of the Doomed*. In this film, there are too many quick cuts to spoil the action; the actors rarely perform more than two moves before the camera cuts to somebody flying back. The wirework is thankfully restrained, but the choreography itself feels too watered down. Ken Low throws some good kicks, but did better work in his Jackie Chan movie appearances. His jumping spin kicks look powerful, but his flying side kicks are less impressive for being so obviously wired-up. Conan Lee, who looked friggin' awesome in the 1982 *Ninja in the Dragon's Den*, is unimpressive here. None of the other performers stand out.

I watched this movie for three reasons. First, I want to watch all of the movies that were produced by Hong Kong during the wire-fu, period-piece boom of the 1990s. So I'm satisfied that I got to see the movie in the first place. Second, I like Ken Low and his kicking. So that

makes me a bit disappointed that he wasn't given more and better fight scenes. Finally, I liked Lam Moon Wah's work in the wire-fu film *Hero of Swallow* enough to have this hope that this film would be entertaining fight-wise. When the man is given the appropriate budget, shooting time and talent, he can actually turn in some good work. Unfortunately, that wasn't the case here. There's almost no reason to watch this movie, unless you're the most hardcore of Hong Kong cinephiles. (by Blake Matthews)

Kung Fu Cult Master (Hong Kong, 1993: Wong Jing) – aka Lord of Wu Tang - This has to be Jet's most underated film, but we love it. *Kung Fu Cult Master* opens with a brief list of the many clans and cults. A bit confusing at first, and even now we don't really know the plot, but we'll do as best we can to break it down.

Jet plays Mo Kei, who as a young child, witnesses his parents being forced to take their own lives by various cult leaders. His mother's last words were him to remember those who were responsible and to take revenge. This may be harder then it sounds for young Mo Kei, as he was hit with the Jinxes palm which prevents him from being able to obtain any kung fu skill.

However, later on when Mo Kei becomes older, he accidentally runs into an old Shaolin Monk, who had been living below the mountains. Mo Kei tricks the monk into curing him of his condition and also into transferring all his kung fu skills into him. Yes, now Jet has become a bad boy kung fu master, he's gonna kick some ass!

From here onwards, we didn't pay much attention to the plot, but was eagerly anticipating when we were going to see Jet unleash his newfound fighting ability. Later on in the film Chang San Fong (Samo Hung), teaches Jet Tai Chi whilst he is taking on the two that hit him with the Jinxes Palm. This scene allows Jet once again to show off his awesome Tai Chi Fist.

The fight scenes were choreographed by Samo Hung. Judging by Samo's track record, we knew that the fights were going to be nothing short of excellent. But if you're not too keen on the idea of Jet taking on the role of Superman, then maybe this flick isn't for you. As with other Jet period pieces, wires are commonly used. In his previous films, yes, Jet could stay in the air for a little longer than physically possible. However, in *KFC master*, Jet was in the air long enough for him to decide which poor sucker was going to be next to feel his power. Jet can really "fly" in this one. (by the Ultimate Jet Li Website)

Kung Fu Scholar (Hong Kong, 1994: Norman Law) - Made during the height of Hong Kong silliness, this is yet another bizarre hybrid of lame-brained humor and frantic martial arts action. The majority of the film revolves around two students (handsome Aaron Kwok and goofy Dicky Cheung) playing pranks and trying to outdo each other. The stunningly beautiful Vivian Chow is on hand as eye candy and to serve as the object of everyone's desire, but sadly has very little to do in the film. While all sorts of silliness is going on at the school, a fierce battle is taking place between kung fu veterans Leung Ka-Yan and Gordon Liu, concerning the custody of the eighth prince (whoever that may be). Leung ends up hiding at the school in the guise of a teacher, but Aaron and Dicky suspect something is up. The three of them eventually team up to defeat the villainous Gordon Liu in a frenetic kung fu free-for-all, and return to the school just in time to beat a rival school in the annual competition.

Painfully silly on every level, but watchable because of the charms and athletic skills of the stars. The action scenes are very well executed and fun to watch. Even the normally annoying Dicky Cheung performs some admirable stuntwork and is quite enjoyable when he's not

overacting and mugging for the camera. Aaron Kwok is at his physical peak and watching him move is pure joy. It's also great to see Leung Ka-Yan and Gordon Liu in action again, as true masters of the genre from an age long gone. Again, there's no reason for Vivian Chow to be in the film, but I'm certainly not complaining as she is simply mesmerizing to watch. Recommended only for kung fu buffs with a high tolerance for inane slapstick. (by Alex Smits of Alex in Wonderland)

Last Hero in China (Hong Kong, 1993: Wong Jing) - Yes, this is the film where Jet Li dresses up as a rooster (or is it a chicken?). I don't know who felt more embarrassed - Jet or me. Here Jet Li takes another go at portraying the same character that he played in the earlier *Once Upon a Time in China* series - Wong Fei-hong. This version though is directed by Wong Jing and it becomes evident fairly quickly that this film is much more Wong Jing than Jet Li.

Much of the film is played for light entertainment and large stretches go by in which Jet goes on a coffee break and the other characters take over. The action (choreographed by Yuen Wo-Ping - *Wing Chun/Matrix*) though not abundant is very imaginative and fun to watch with a heavy reliance on wires. The comedic bits were not terrible by any means - some of it was amusing - but not really what I want out of a Jet Li film.

The film begins with Jet Li at the Canton train station waiting for Auntie Yee to arrive. He receives a note sent from her explaining that she has had to go elsewhere (so no Rosamund Kwan for this film), but three members of the Boxer Association, on the run from the police, take Jet as a hostage. Need I say that this was a poor decision on their part? In a nice little action scene Jet effortlessly disarms them while carrying flowers in one hand and a baby in the other.

Much of the next fifty minutes is Wong Jing time with Jet moving his school inadvertently next to a brothel run by Natalis Chan. One of Natalis's relatives is Anita Yuen and in a funny scene she and one of her colleagues try to seduce Jet. Even a musical number is thrown into the pot.

Another plot thread begins with the appearance of Cheung Man and her father. They are looking for her sister who has been kidnapped. Their investigation has led them to a temple where it turns out that the monks are in cahoots with the authorities (who are secretly Boxers as well) to sell many girls into slavery to south Asia.

Finally, Jet is drawn into stopping this conspiracy and while trying to rescue Anita has a wonderful kung-fu duel with the great Gordon Liu that takes place on, over and under a wooden plank bridge.

Later, Jet Li enters into a Lion Dance festival. I have to admit to having a weakness for these ornately costumed and beautifully choreographed dances. You can't go wrong with them as far as I am concerned and especially with Jet Li doing the honors. The main bad guy and his crew show up to do battle with Jet. He comes outfitted as a centipede with a flame-thrower and Jet is unable to figure out how to beat it and loses the competition. Later he sees a rooster killing a centipede and regrettably decides to come back to the competition dressed as a rooster - beak, claws and all. Actually, the last fight is terrific as Jet goes from kung-fu rooster to drunken master.

This is a difficult film to judge. It certainly has some good action sequences, some decent comedy - but I would not say it is really a good Jet Li film - if that makes any sense. In many ways it is more of an ensemble piece with a lot of the actors getting time. This of course means

that Jet gets less time. Take that as you may. (by Brian of View from the Brooklyn Bridge)

Legend of the Drunken Tiger (Taiwan, 1991: Tai Bou-San) - This was not on my list of movies to watch, but I felt I *had* to watch it after the disappointment of watching Drunken Master 3. This Taiwanese cheapie features action direction from Robert Tai (*Five Deadly Venoms*, *Crippled Avengers*, *Invincible Shaolin*) and Alexander Lo Rei and features ex-Shaw Bros starlet Kara Hui Ying-Hung in a lead role. The movie feels like a prototype for Yuen Woo-Ping's *True Legend*, in which it's practically two different movies stitched together, the second being a tale of Chinese nationalism. The first half tells about the attempts to save the daughter of a condemned general from being forced to marry a Qing official (played by Ku Feng). The second half is about our heroes trying to rescue Chinese women from sexual slavery at the hands of foreign militaries following the quashing of the Boxer Rebellion (look fast for Alexander Lo Rei as an American military officer!)

There isn't enough action here to really satisfy, especially from the lead (Chui Kei-Wai, playing a historical figure named Chiang San, whom I don't know anything about), whom the director almost didn't feel confident enough to let loose. Robert Tai and Alexander Lo Rei bring kung fu back to its old school roots here, with little of the over-the-top wire stunts that defined *Once Upon a Time in China* that same year. Chiang San does some OK drunken boxing (his form work is better than his applied techniques), but who really shines in the action is Kara Hui, who kicks, stabs, slashes and spears her way past the hero in one of her best post-Shaw roles. Watch the movie mainly for her. (by Blake Matthews)

Legend of the Flying Swordsman (Hong Kong, 1999: Bosco Lam) - Never judge a film by its title. This is definitely not the movie I was expecting. Rather than a swashbuckling epic with lots of stylish wire-fu and reasonable CG special effects this is more of a drama that sits somewhere between *Ashes of Time* and *Storm Riders* (although not as good as either of those two).

Fun Li spends everyday drinking, much to the distress of his new wife of 6 days with whom he has yet to spend a day sober. Also upset by this state of affairs is Fun Li's father (Sonny Chiba) who can barely stand to be in the same room as his son. While Sonny's character is a successful businessman, he owns a security business, he sees his son as nothing but a disappointment. When Fun Li's wife gives birth to a son this is only the cause of more relationship strains.

Similar to *Ashes of Time* the film is filled with interesting characters and while Fun Li is at the heart of the film enough time is given to development of the other members of the cast. In terms of the plot the film seems to go off at tangents without any clear direction and for me it got quite difficult to follow. It's one of those that you don't really realise what's happened until you get to the end, this is due to the non-linear story telling and use of flashbacks and dream sequences. The film is also full of symbolism and surrealism which, to be honest, went a bit over my head (just what was the point of the big drum that kept appearing ?). By the end all signs of a coherent plot disappeared as the film degenerated into a bit of a mess.

There is one single fight scene and it's a real throwback to the new wave kung fu style of the early nineties. With lots of wire work and liberal use of under cranking it's nothing original but it is still quite nice to watch. There is limited use of CG special effects in the fight but it's nowhere near the standard of films like *A Man Called Hero* or *Storm Riders*.

With the style of the storytelling and the use of imagery it seemed as if the film makers were trying to make something a bit arty but at the same time the liberal sprinkling of Canto pop points to an intended mainstream audience. (by John Richards of Wasted Life)

Legend of the Liquid Sword (Hong Kong, 1993: Yeung Wai-Yip, Wong Jing) - 1993 was a busy year for Wong Jing, with around twenty pictures carrying his name in some way, whether it was as a director, producer, writer, or actor. Even for a film-maker known for his blitzkrieg style, this breakneck pace resulted in many half-ass productions, of which the middling martial arts movie *Legend of the Liquid Sword* is a prime example.

A major facet of Wong Jing's style is his "flying paper" technique. Basically, his scripts are quickly written and are often changed on the set. Surprisingly, many times, this results in a cohesive story, but that is not the case here. In fact, there really isn't a story at all. Aaron Kwok plays a smirking swordsman who travels around with his three sisters and meets up with Chingmy Yau, who, in one of the lamest Hong Kong movie traditions, is disguised as a man. Yet still Aaron is turned on. Hm. That's one to grow on, I guess.

Anyway, the group also encounters the incredibly annoying Deric Wan, who is supposedly the comic relief, but just comes off like a wannabe Stephen Chow while he does so-called hilarious bits where he dresses up as Jesus and proclaims the strength of his Jesus punches -- or, rather, "Jusus paunches" as the craptacular subtitles on the terrible Xenon DVD bring across. Eventually, our merry band of mentally disabled martial artists join forces to take on some low budget goth villain named Batman. Yeah, Batman.

Oh, and in case you were wondering, there's not a single liquid sword presented during the proceedings, much less any sort of legend around it. Really, this whole movie just comes off like Wong Jing dropped every martial arts movie cliché into a word processor and hit the randomize button. There is a sort of schizophrenic charm to the proceedings which holds the audience's interest for a bit, and the usual Wong Jing casting method of stuffing the film full of buxom young ladies was much appreciated.

Ultimately, though, *Legend of the Liquid Sword* is the sort of movie that adds to Wong's poor reputation. It was obviously cranked out to make a quick buck, to the point that there's no real ending. Supposedly, this was supposed to be the first entry in a trilogy, but since this film tanked, Wong scrapped those plans and went on to make the somewhat related release *Holy Weapon*. After sitting through *Legend of the Liquid Sword*, one can at least thank Wong that he didn't have the delusion that anyone would want to see part two of this. (by HKFilm.net)

Legend of the Sacred Stone (Taiwan, 2000: Chris Huang) - There's one school of thought that says, if you're tired of London, you're tired of life.

There's another, similar school of thought that states, my life could end happily right now if only there were a violent kung fu film starring puppets.

Those people of the second school may now make their appointments with Dr. Kervorkian. From Taiwan comes *Legend of the Sacred Stone*, an all-puppet special effects extravaganza set in China 400 years ago. It's actually the feature film version of a highly successful TV show, which, along with the fact that we saw it translated to English via Japanese, may explain why it is not the most coherent story we've ever watched.

Legend of the Sacred Stone opens with a huge battle that takes place on a mountaintop. On one side of the clash is Mo Kuei, a demon-empowered warrior so powerful he can throw his enemies around like they are rag dolls. Of course, his enemies are rag dolls, but take our word for it: Mo Kuei is pretty strong. On the other side are the heads of the six schools, who are all basically over-accessorized pussies, and three holy warriors, who represent the only real hope of defeating Mo Kuei. After Mo Kuei is thrown into the earth he emerges with powers that make him "invincible," a word this movie throws around quite a bit, usually right before the "invincible" character proves to be quite "vincible." In response to the newly empowered Mo Kuei, the three holy warriors employ their own individual techniques. The first warrior uses "Gentleman's Wind," the second uses "Hatred of Heaven and Earth," and the third uses an unnamed power that involves fireballs erupting out of his body and spikes shooting out of his mouth. We'll call it "Bad Meal at Taco Bell."

This sequence introduces us to the most disturbing thing about *Legend of the Sacred Stone*: the puppets bleed. This is particularly strange because beyond bleeding and being flexible enough to perform kung fu, these puppets aren't particularly realistic depictions of the human form. Their faces are completely immobile, and their features are very simplistic -- so much so that some of the characters can only be told apart by their clothing. They just don't look real enough to bleed. Most other films and TV shows that portray puppets with biological processes do so for the comic shock value, such as *Meet the Feebles* and Ken Begg's favorite film, *Let My Puppets Come*. *Legend of the Sacred Stone*, on the other hand, is utterly serious. If you'll allow us a bit of a Dave Barry moment, however, we'd like to point out that "The Bleeding Puppets" would make one helluva name for a punk rock band.

The heads of the six schools take the now-immobilized Mo Kuei to a remote place where they can bury his body, hopefully forever. Before they can finish, however, the group is attacked by demon warriors called the Unfriendlies. The Unfriendlies ("Now opening for The Bleeding Puppets... The Unfreindlies!") are kind of like skeletons wearing black cloaks, but they also seem to have a mechanical aspect to them, and after seeing what they do to the heads of the six schools we decided the mechanical part of the Unfriendlies are from a blender, and they've been set to puree. In no time flat the heads of the six schools are in about 600 pieces.

To make a long story short, the Unfriendlies make off with Mo Kuei and he never shows up again. No, really. The big bad guy becomes a footnote in the story, while our heroes (an almost completely different bunch than the ones we started with) face off against the Unfriendlies for the rest of the movie. Herein lies one of the major problems for Western audiences -- there's simply too much back story to absorb in ninety minutes. It would be like watching a *Simpsons* feature film without ever having seen an episode of the TV show. Only, you know, with serious dramatic undertones, mystical kung-fu action, and puppets who bleed when you stab them.

But wait, it gets even worse. In Chinese all the character's voices are dubbed by one man... even the female characters! And he doesn't really vary his voice by much. As if we weren't having enough trouble getting through the long dialogue passages of non-emoting puppets, most of the time they sound like they're talking to themselves.

Legend of the Sacred Stone (can you believe we have to start another synopsis for this picture?) more or less centers around Lord Jian, a former nobleman whose family (with the exception of his loyal daughter, Ru-Bing) was killed by the Unfriendlies years ago. Jian himself was disfigured by the demons (earning him the nickname "Mister Boneskin" -- which could easily be an album name for The Bleeding Puppets), and his remaining days have been spent plotting revenge and searching for a way to restore his former good looks.

To this end, Jian -- who gets our votes for The Puppet Most Likely To Make You Vomit -- asks Ru-Bing to recruit the legendary martial arts master Su Huan-Jen (one of the few continuing characters whom we saw in the opening battle) in the cause of retrieving the Heaven Stone. Bear with us, because this is where the movie becomes the plot equivalent of a Legend of Zelda video game. Retrieving the Stone requires two keys, of which Ru-Bing has one. Together the keys and the Stone will provide access to the Mirror of Pu-Ti, which can dispel souls. Su Huan-Jen knows that finally destroying the evil soul of Mo Kuei will keep him from ever reincarnating again. Huan-Jen therefore agrees to help out, if only to keep the Unfreundlies from acquiring the Heaven Stone.

While Su (yes, he's a Boy Named Su) and his sidekick Ching Yang Zi -- who is apparently the world's deadliest zither player -- seek the keys and the Heaven's Stone, Ru-Bing visits her father's old friend Ao Hsiao Hong-Chen, a bitter hermit (but, you know, in a hunky sort of way). Ao, who just happens to be master of the "Imperial sword arts," agrees to aid Ru-Bing as well. There's a bit of rivalry and past bad blood between Su and Ao, though it's difficult to tell why through the translation. Suffice it to say that Ao is one puppet who acts like he's got a rod up his ass.

All of these plot elements come banging together in the middle when two things are revealed: first, that the power of the Heaven Stone is to grant wishes, though the wisher must sacrifice his own life as a part of the bargain. The second revelation is that the Unfreundlies can impersonate anyone they choose. That's right, friends, in a film with a muddled translation, limited voice acting and puppets so closely modeled on one another that it's difficult to tell the characters apart, the audience is now called upon to comprehend a story in which we're not sure if we're watching the actions of a character or that character's doppelganger. No offense to the members of our puppet readership out there, but stolen-identity plots are hard enough to pull off with human actors. Puppets should stick to highly identifiable physical traits, distinctive clothing, and nametags where possible.

The Unfreundlies use their shape-changing powers to impersonate the various members of the cast, thereby pitting would-be allies against one another. There are several climactic fight scenes, lots of showy pyrotechnics (both digital and physical), and a couple of weepy death scenes in which puppets clutch one another as they croak. The End.

The question we asked ourselves when we purchased this movie was: sure, it has puppets kicking ass, but are they any good at it? Rod puppetry is an ancient and revered art, sure, but can the sight of one finely-painted wood-and-cloth figure beating the tar out of another stir the blood in the same way as a good Jackie Chan or Jet Li flick? The answer, somewhat surprisingly, is . . . sort of. It turns out that talented puppeteers and filmmakers -- and speaking technically, they are very good -- can actually make puppet combat compelling. The inspiration here is obviously the work of Ching Siu Tung (*Chinese Ghost Story, Hero*), and a scene of bridge combat is ably stolen from *Last Hero in China*. But no level of technical prowess can quite dispel the images we have of the Thunderbirds running through the backs of our heads. Suspended somewhere between the realism of live actors, and the escapist removal from reality supplied by animation, where you can believe just about anything (see Samurai Jack), puppetry action scenes may never quite satisfy. It really doesn't matter how much red food coloring you pump through their little foam rubber bodies. (by Scott Hamilton and Chris Hamilton of Stomp Tokyo)

Little Hero on the Run (Taiwan, 1995: Lee Chiu, Tenky Tin) - I'm not sure how the Taiwanese movie industry functioned after the death of the traditional kung fu film in the early 80s. I

mean, Taiwanese audiences apparently still enjoyed these movies after Hong Kong stopped caring, since they kept churning them out. At some point, Taiwan jumped onto the Ninja Craze Bandwagon and started producing some of the most insane examples of the sub-genre (that is, until the Japanese decided that ninja movies were the perfect outlets for women who could fire energy weapons from their private parts), thanks to the efforts of Alexander Lo Rei and Robert Tai. What's really interesting is that around the mid-80s, Taiwanese filmmakers found another niche that defined a huge portion of their action/martial arts output: the martial arts children sub-genre.

While butt-kicking kids had already been showing up here and there in kung fu movies for years, the Taiwanese built their own cottage industry around the little high-kicking tykes, starting with the hugely-popular *Kung Fu Kids* series. That movie spawned numerous sequels and rip-off's/cash-in's, like the *7 Lucky Ninja Kids* and whatnot. Then in the 1990s, Taiwan gave us the *Shaolin Popey* series, which I haven't seen, although I know that it gave us a kid performing drunken fist boxing after sucking on the breast of a well-endowed woman in a superhero outfit. I have yet to wrap my mind around that one.

At first glance, *Little Hero on the Run* feels like it will be one those movies. It isn't quite that, although it features a handful of young kids trained in wushu. It feels more like a transplant of the previous year's *New Legend of Shaolin* from the Qing Dynasty to the Republic Period, with a lot of the vulgar humor and over-the-top action sensibilities excised. The new setting, combined with the presence of super-kicker Ben Lam wearing a Western suit, gave me the impression that the spectre of *Drunken Master 2* (also made the year before) was also hanging over the proceedings.

I'm no expert on Chinese history, but I know that after Dr. Sun Yat-Sen helped overthrow the Qing Dynasty and install a government based around Western sensibilities, it didn't take long for the country to descend into chaos, with warlords taking over entire provinces and waging bloody battles against each other in a quest to consolidate their power. It is against this backdrop that *LHOTR* is set, as the children of some five murdered generals are on the run from a warlord named Yuen, whom I'm guessing is Yuen Shih-Kai. Kung fu fans might recognize as the villain from Sammo Hung's *Blade of Fury*. Asian history buffs will know him as the yahoo who proclaimed himself emperor of China during the Republic era and who is largely responsible for the country descending into warlordism in the first place.

Anyway, so there are some loyal supporters to the dead generals trying to protect the kids from Yuen and his hired killers. Caught in the middle is a young martial artist named Fok (Chin Kar-Lok), who's trying to cross the country in order to carry out his father's dying wish that he'd collect an old debt and marry the daughter of said debtor. Fok doesn't really want to help, but he ends up promising the dying brother of a female patriot that he'll help her and the kids get to safety (there are a lot of dying promises in this film). It turns out that the city the kids are going to is the same city Fok's bride-to-be lives in and it won't be long before everybody's path crosses in the most violent way possible.

That last sentence sums up a huge difference between Chinese and American filmmaking sensibilities: Chinese filmmakers traditionally have never flinched at surrounding little kids with violence in an action film, whether they be the ones dishing out the hurt, witnesses to the fact, or even the ones getting ruthlessly slaughtered. It's like that crappy *Extreme Crisis* film: I dare you to make a Hollywood popcorn action flick in which the terrorists gun down a little child in cold blood in front of the camera. In the case of *LHOTR*, we have a plot revolving around the attempts to protect a group of little kids whom the villains unambiguously want to

kill, whom are constantly placed in danger of life and limb and in situations where characters—often the good guys—die violent, bloody deaths. The fact that the kids are often goofy/annoying makes the contrast all the more jarring, especially to anyone who might be new to Hong Kong cinema. I'm not, so it was more or less business as usual.

While I'm practically immune to Hong Kong films mixing brutal violence and goofy kids, I won't hesitate to take points away from this movie for making the child characters into practical non-entities. I mean, the kids had absolutely no personality at all. While the analogous characters in *New Legend of Shaolin* were no paragons of three-dimensional characterization, those kids at least at some defining trait: Tse Miu was the righteous butt-kicker who loved his dad, was a loyal friend, and (understandably) wanted his dad to have the privilege of sleeping with Chingmy Yau; Ma's son was the arrogant troupe leader; Fong was the put-upon fat kid; etc. The kids in LHOTR just whine, eat, and occasionally beat someone up. I wish the writer had done a little more with them.

I'm sure the problem stems from the fact that there are just too many characters for the film to deal with. There are no less than four main villains: Yuen Shih-Kai, his two sons (played by Ben Lam of *Police Story II* and Tso Chung-Sing, who was assistant director of Van Damme's *Knock Off*), and the leader of the assassins; two love interests (*Rock n'Roll Cop's* Jennifer Chan and Yip Fong); a greedy father-in-law; five kids; and the main hero, Fok. Other than Fok and Ying (Yip Fong's character), not enough time is spent with the other characters to really make a difference. Yuen Shih-Kai just shows up a few times to berate his men for failing to kill the kids; you could've written him out of the film and it would've been better for it. The big misstep the film makes with regards to the characters is spending a good portion of the second act on a broadly comic battle of wits between Fok and his would-be father-in-law (Kwan Bun, who showed up a year later in *3 Kung Fu Kids*). It kills the pace of the movie and could have been used to develop the characters and their conflicts more.

LHOTR's biggest claim to fame is that it is a Chin Kar-Lok film. Chin Kar-Lok is an especially fascinating name in Chinese cinema. During the 1980s, he worked mainly as a stuntman and supporting actor for the Hung Ga Ban—his biggest claim to fame as a stuntman, as I understand it, is that he often doubled for Jackie Chan when it came to performing some of the more showy kicks. Although he had some notable roles in the 1980s, such as *Mr. Vampire 4*, it was in the 1990s that he really tried to break out and become the next Jet Li. Chin showed up in movies like *Martial Arts Master Wong Fei Hung* (a poor man's *OUATIC*); *Shaolin Avengers* (a poor man's *Fong Sai Yuk*); and *The Green Hornet*, which seems to be a poor man's *Black Mask*. He even showed up in a remake of *King Boxer*, better known by B-movie lovers as *Five Fingers of Death*. However, none of those movies were the hits that would transport him to stardom, so in the early aughts, Chin changed his approach. He focused more on action direction (and meaty supporting roles) and has since become one of the critically-acclaimed action directors of recent years. Although he has yet to take home a Best Action Design Award from the Hong Kong Film Awards, he has racked up a more-than-respectable number of nominations for movies like *Star Runner*; *Protégé*; *Viral Factor*; *Motorway*; *One Nite in Mongkok*; and others. So bully for him for finding his place, even if he never became the next Jet Li.

Under the direction of former Sing Ga Ban (Jackie Chan Stuntman Association) member Danny Chow, Chin Kar-Lok delivers a fantastic physical performance that ranks up there with his best work. Chin was obviously an excellent kicker, although his style was a lot more fluid and rounded then, say, co-star Ben Lam or Ken Low. His jump kicks don't reach dizzying heights

here, but they are executed with a speed that makes them look practically effortless, which is impressive in itself. The first couple of fights are a little more chaotic and Chin seems to be mainly on the defensive, but he really cuts loose after the hour mark. Ben Lam (best known to me for outfighting Jet Li in *High Risk*) shows off some powerful kicks, especially in a fight near the end where he lays waste to his own lackeys.

Danny Chow thankfully limits the use of wires in the action, saving them mainly for villain Tso Chung-Sing, who performs some flying kicks and punches that look more at home in a *Fong Sai Yuk* film. Beyond that, he lets the other actors be their own special effects. There is some weapons work (swords, staffs, etc.) to shake things up, but it's mainly fisticuffs without any of the wire-enhanced, environment-based fighting that defined that decade.

Little Hero on the Run is ultimately a flawed film, but it certainly doesn't deserve the MIA status that has followed it throughout the years. Much like *King of the Sea*, it either never got a DVD release, or got an extremely limited one (the copy my friend sent me suggested that it got a bare-bones DVD release with the theatrical burned-on subtitles intact). It was mainly available on VHS from Tai Seng up until a few years ago. A search on Google turned up no results save its entry on the HKMDB and a short review on the now-defunct Martial Artist's Guide to Hong Kong Films (I miss that place, the author's unpopular opinions notwithstanding). If you're a martial arts fan and can track down a copy (presumably through... *cough* ...legal means), it's worth a watch. (by Blake Matthews)

Mad Monk (Hong Kong, 1993: Johnnie To) – *The Mad Monk* (1993) has been one of my "holy grail" films for ages, due to the inavailability of a dvd release with Cantonese audio (I tried watching in Mandarin and it hurt the film badly, so I'm glad I waited). Finally a decent release has surfaced as part of the Celestial pictures Shaw Brothers library (nicely restored and remastered, with original mono and a pretty good subtitle translation... and the all important Cantonese audio track). I think the film's reputation has suffered unfairly from the number of people that have only seen it in Mandarin, as it's a pretty good Chiau film, though not one of his best.

The plot is... complicated! Chiau plays a heavenly "fairy" (love the misuse of that word in HK subtitles :p) who annoys the other celestial beings by meddling with their plans for humanity. It turns out Chiau feels human beings get a rough deal from the gods, who should learn to be more compassionate. He suggests they should try living amongst the humans to get a better feel for them, and (didn't quite follow this) ends up being sent down to earth to try and redeem the lives of a beggar, a prostitute and a villain by proving they can become "decent folk".

The story quickly becomes complicated, with references to Buddhist philosophy and mythology that the subtitles can hardly be hoped to adequately explain to a gwei lo like me, and not particularly helped by the mo-lei-tau comedy that is mixed in haphazardly with more serious material. Events fly by with little exposition, and I can only imagine that the audience was expected to be more familiar with the character and story than this viewer was.

Production values are surprisingly low for a film with such a star cast and crew, with some really obviously visible makeup and inexcusably visible wires. The sets for heaven are exceedingly artificial, but I imagine this was at least partially deliberate. The action in the film largely consists of Ching Siu-Tung's trademark flying, twirling and wholesale destruction of scenery... it's not amongst his best work.

I guess those would count as flaws, so why do I say it's "pretty good"? Well, because it features Stephen Chiau doing what he does best - being himself! Some of the supporting cast offer worthy moments, particularly Anthony Wong, but it's Chiau that carries the film. There was apparently quite a bit of conflict between Chiau and director Johnnie To on set, and that may explain the inconsistent tone and style - there are bits that are definitely Chiau moments and others that are definitely not. Apparently To's self-confidence was hurt by the experience, and he considered quitting as a director... I'm glad he didn't, given some of the fantastic work he has produced since, but it does seem that this particular job was not right for him. It would have been very interesting to see what Tsui Hark made of the film, since re-imaging traditional stories and genres was his forte, and he was at his peak around the time this was made. I can't imagine him and Chiau working together though... if he was butting heads with Johnnie To, he would probably have killed or been killed by Tsui Hark!

Another virtue of the film is Maggie Cheung, who may not be acting to the best of her ability but certainly looks lovely here :) Anita Mui's small amount of screen time as the Goddess Of Mercy herself is also a plus.

Overall, I'd say there's more that's right with the film than wrong, though it is definitely a lesser Chiau film and *certainly* not one to use as an introduction to the man or to HK cinema. For the aficionados out there, it's definitely worth seeing - now that there's a dvd release that does it justice. (by MrBooth of HKMDB)

Magic Crane (Hong Kong, 1993: Benny Chan) - This is one of those über wuxia films from the early 1990s that rank up there with *Kung Fu Cult Master* and *Butterfly and Sword*. A bunch of schools from the martial world get together at a fort to negotiate and join forces against an ambitious and vicious new school, led by Lawrence Ng. Tony Leung Chiu-Wai and Damian Lau represent the smallest school in China (their rapport helps make the movie) and get involved with several different conflicts, including a rivalry between two mysterious female martial artists (Rosamund Kwan and Anita Mui), the latter whom rides the titular Bird. Then one of the leaders eats half a sacred manual and it all goes to hell.

There is a lot of wire-fu action, courtesy of Lau Chi-Ho, a protégé of Ching Siu-Tung. His other credits include *The Big Hit* and *A Better Tomorrow 3*. There is some swordplay, but the bulk of the action is made up of Qi attacks, many of which are channeled through musical instruments, and flying people. The FX are hokey, but Lau's manic action direction makes up for it and it's kind of sad that he hasn't done as many noteworthy films as Ma Yuk-Sing, another of Ching's "students".

Oh, and that lucky bastard Tony Leung Chiu-Wai gets a blow job from Rosamund Kwan. We also learn that a female martial arts master is capable of expelling semen from her private parts after sex so that she can't get pregnant. In the end, it's not quite as good as the other films I mentioned, but it's a wild ride for all. (by Blake Matthews)

Man Called Hero, A (Hong Kong, 1999: Andrew Lau) - *A Man Called Hero* is the stylistic sequel to the 1998 hit *The Storm Riders* and is the second film in Andrew Lau's "CGI Tetralogy," a series of four films^[1] that really pushed the envelope on the use of digital effects in Hong Kong cinema. Like its predecessor, the source material for *A Man Called Hero* is a comic book by Hong Kong native Ma Wing-Shing, although the journey from paper to celluloid ended up a lot bumpier for this particular film. And, as is the case for lots of movies that exist mainly to

show off the talents of the special effects technicians, the flaws in the more artistic aspects of the production bring the effects to the foreground, and ultimately date them, leaving the film as little more than a time capsule today.

The story is ultimately pretty simple, but convoluted by the fact that it's told primarily in flashback. We open in the early days of the 20th century, in which our protagonist, Hero Hua (Ekin Cheng, of the *Young and Dangerous* films and *The Storm Riders*), is going to marry his girlfriend Jade and is poised to become a great martial artist under the tutelage of his *sifu*, Master Pride (*The Untold Story*'s Anthony Wong, in an extended cameo). All that changes when Hero's parents are murdered by opium dealers in retaliation for his father's inflammatory articles about them. Hero responds by slicing off the head of the main opium dealer, which necessitates his fleeing China for the United States, but not before knocking up Jade.

Sixteen years later, Hero's son, Sword (Nicolas Tse, of *Dragon Tiger Gate* and *2002*), arrives in the USA with Hero's best friend Sheng (Jerry Lamb), in search of dad. At New York's Chinatown, Sword befriends the de facto head of the neighborhood and hotel owner, played by Yuen Biao (of *Knockabout* and *Kick Boxer*). Yuen introduces Sword to a monk named Luohan (*Drunken Master II*'s Ken Lo, in a non-fighting role). In our first flashback, Luohan reveals that he had met Hero during the voyage to the States, where the two of them ended up working at a mine under slave-like conditions. Hero quickly made enemies with the Chinese foreman, Bigot (Tsui Kam-Kong, of *Prison on Fire 2* and *The Eternal Evil of Asia*), and even killed one of the mine employees for mistreating the Chinese. Hero is saved from execution by the intervention of both Luohan and Shadow (Dion Lam, the film's fight choreographer), Hero's elder kung fu brother.

At this point, the narrative switches over to a flashback from Sheng, who tells of his arrival in the United States together with Jade, who is now several months pregnant. They eventually find Hero Hua, who is working as a rickshaw puller in Chinatown. Husband and wife are reunited, and they set up shop in Chinatown while awaiting the arrival of their new child(ren).

That's where the narrative becomes a flashback told from Shadow's point of view. Things get hairy when a quintet of Japanese ninja working for Master Invincible (Francis Ng, of *The Mission* and *The White Dragon*) show up looking to pick a fight. The ninja are led by Jin (Mark Cheng, of *Tai Chi II* and *War*), and among their number is Mu (Shu Qi, another *Storm Riders* alumni). Hero Hua and Shadow are able to defeat the ninja in combat. Hero Hua saves Mu's life and nurses her back to health, causing her to fall in love with him, much to Jin's dismay. Jin gets back at Hero Hua—how dare he treat Mu like a human being and not a sex object!—by teaming up with Bigot and setting the hotel where Jade is giving birth on fire.

Jade dies of asphyxiation during their escape, and Hero Hua's daughter ends up in Bigot's clutches. Sword, the twin brother, is given to Sheng, who takes him back to China to raise him. Meanwhile, Hero Hua and Shadow go to Japan to witness a duel between Master Pride and Master Invincible. Pride wins but is mortally wounded. Before expiring, he passes on a special technique to Hero Hua, who stays in Japan training for the next 16 years. Cut back to the present day...

There is a lot going on in this film, and one wonders if it wasn't unwise to include so many subplots from the comic book in a single film. There are a lot of threads left unresolved at the end, the most glaring one being the lack of resolution to the subplot involving Hero Hua's lost daughter. Jin, the evil ninja, gets away too, setting up a sequel that would revolve around the love triangle between him, Mu and Hero Hua, but that never came to light. There's sort of a

hinted romance between Sword and Shadow's daughter, Kate (Grace Yip), but nothing comes of that, either. In fact, I can't help but wonder why Kate is in the movie in the first place, since she does nothing that is important to the story.

Much like origin-story films in the current Marvel Cinematic Universe, the villain is pushed into the background until the third act, when the hero needs someone to fight for the climax. There are two sets of bad guys, those being Master Invincible and his ninja, and the owners of the mine, who team up with the KKK for the climatic showdown in Chinatown[2]. The movie would've done better to focus mainly on the mine owners, which might've turned the film into a profound statement about the plight of Chinese immigrants during the 19th and early 20th centuries. But since the film is trying to say a lot of things at the same time, it ends up saying absolutely nothing at all. Moreover, by the time we reach the end, Hero Hua has become so powerful that you can't possibly imagine them being a match for him.

Speaking of powers, *A Man Called Hero* has some glaring holes in its internal logic on account of its characters being super-powered kung fu masters. In *The Storm Riders*, there's a consistency in that those in power are the ones whose martial arts superpowers are the strongest, or at least most well-honed. *A Man Called Hero* features characters that can transform into water or fireballs, or cause people to explode with *qi* blasts, etc., but simultaneously suffer at the hands of otherwise ordinary people and mundane dangers. If Hero Hua can jump roof to roof at dizzying speeds *a lá* Spider-Man, why would it take him so long to flee the hotel when it's on fire? Or why did he suffer at all at the hands of the mine employees when he could have killed every single one of them in three seconds flat? Why are Master Invincible and his ninja cohorts wasting their time on trying to kill Hero Hua, when they have enough superpowers to conquer their homeland?

In an American comic book film, people with superpowers either accept the responsibility of making the world a better place or embark upon a quest for power because those around them are inferior beings. In *A Man Called Hero*, superpowers are treated as the natural consequence of excelling at kung fu and yet nobody thinks of the real-world implications of possessing those powers. If I'm strong enough slice the Statue of Liberty to pieces with my super sword skills, I'll either start robbing safes, or stop those who do. In this movie, these powers are treated with the same sense of awe you might attribute to a well-executed jumping spin kick.

I'm sure that audiences in 1999 who flocked to this were impressed with the CGI battles on display. Today, those scenes are not only unimpressive, but it's hard to imagine what audiences enjoyed back then. There are three main digital battles, the first being the duel with the ninja in an alleyway. One ninja can transform into drops of water and another into fireballs. Yawn. Shu Qi's Mu can fire a bunch of CGI chains at her opponent like Doctor Octopus, but still...yawn. The big duel between Anthony Wong and Francis Ng consists of them standing in a big puddle and sending blasts of CGI water at each other until Wong declares himself the victor...okay, whatever. The climax on the Statue of Liberty is the most sustained fight scene and probably the best in the film. There's some decent swordplay between Ekin Cheng and Francis Ng, and the film predates the *X-Men* duel between Wolverine and Sabretooth by a year and features even more carnage. I'm not sure if this is the prime contribution of Dion Lam to action cinema, but it's not bad.

Those looking for actual martial arts will have to content themselves with a few brief dustups from Yuen Biao. His character is introduced when some employees from the mine show up in Chinatown looking for Luohan, whom Yuen has hidden. Yuen then beats them up and sends them packing. Later on, Yuen tussles with the head of the mine, who has brought the KKK to

Chinatown. The two exchange some kicks—where did the white guy learn to kick like that—before Yuen does a wire-fu flip kick and knocks him out. Being generous, these fights represent about two minutes of a two-hour running time. It's always a nice sight to see Yuen Biao fighting, although his kicks are surprisingly low in this film—was he recovering from an injury at this point?

A Man Called Hero continued the trend that *The Storm Riders*, and, to a lesser extent, *Dr. Wei and the Scripture with No Words*, started in brining “state-of-the-art” digital effects to traditional Chinese fight choreography. However, as we're talking about 90s CGI here, the effects haven't aged well at all, and the most memorable action sequences involve a 41-year-old Yuen Biao fighting below his physical potential. Later movies to do the same thing, like Stephen Chow's *Shaolin Soccer* and *Kung Fu Hustle*, would benefit from stronger direction, a more comedic setting, and a general improvement in the artistic aspects of the film, which end up strengthening the action sequences themselves. That's why people still remember those two films fondly today, while this movie is little more than a footnote in the history of Hong Kong cinema. (by Blake Matthews)

Martial Arts Master Wong Fei Hung (Hong Kong, 1992: Lee Chiu) - aka Great Hero in China -

The name of Chin Kar Lok should be one that needs no introduction to anyone who considers themselves a fan of Hong Kong action cinema. The current president of the Hong Kong Stuntman Association and respected action director, back in the golden era of HK action cinema that was the 1980's, Kar Lok was one the most fearless stuntmen working in the industry. As a member of Sammo Hung's Stuntman Association, chances are if you were watching a Jackie or Sammo movie and saw a thug go crashing out of a third floor window / get mowed down by a speeding car / take a painful looking fall on the receiving end of a kick or punch, it would be Kar Lok.

As well as the stunt work, his physical dexterity saw him doubling for moves that even someone like Jackie Chan couldn't pull off. In *Dragons Forever*, both the head over heels kick performed on the steps of the boat, and the finishing 360 helicopter kick to Benny 'The Jet' Urquidez are performed by Kar Lok, a fact that once known becomes blatantly apparent upon watching. So understandably, by the beginning of the 90's, while Kar Lok's older brother Chin Siu Ho was already an established leading man in the kung fu movie world, the decision was made to also thrust the younger Chin sibling into starring status.

Kar Lok's most well remembered leading role remains as the hero in *Operation Scorpio*, where he famously took on Korean super kicker Won Jin using the unorthodox method of eel kung fu. Outside of *Operation Scorpio* though, he must also be the only actor to have played three legendary characters in the space of 4 short years – in 1991 he assumed the mantle of Wisely in *Bury Me High*, then a year later he stepped into the shoes of Wong Fei Hung in *Martial Arts Master Wong Fei Hung*, before donning the mask of Kato in 1994's *The Green Hornet*. Out of the three productions, I always found his take on Wong Fei Hung to be the most curious.

Released the same year as *Once Upon a Time in China II*, whoever made the decision to go up against Jet Li's take on the historical figure most likely never worked again. That's not to say that *Martial Arts Master Wong Fei Hung* doesn't come with its own pedigree of talent. *Once Upon a Time in China II* may have had Donnie Yen as the villain (all be it before Donnie Yen became 'Donnie Yen!'), but Kar Lok had a foe in the form of kung fu cinema legend Lam Ching Ying. Made just a couple of years before his untimely death, Ching Ying was well known for

wanting to get away from *the Mr. Vampire* styled Taoist priest roles that he'd found himself typecast in, since taking the lead in the 1985 seminal classic.

Here he plays a wandering Japanese samurai, who's only wish is to take on the most famous Chinese martial artists in order to prove that he's the best. Indeed in many ways his character is reminiscent of Frankie Chan's role in *The Prodigal Son*, however his musings feel straight out of a Chor Yuen directed Shaw Brothers wuxia, as he dwells on how it's lonely at the top, and that whoever eventually beats him will be destined to the same loneliness. Deep stuff, however beyond his words he's very much a 2-dimensional antagonist, one who arrives on the scene via landing on top of a flying coffin and announcing that he wants to challenge Fei Hung's father. If nothing else, it's certainly an arrival that serves as a reminder that we're watching an early 90's new wave movie.

The pairing of Kar Lok and Ching Ying must have worked well together, as it would be Ching Ying who'd step into the director's chair for *The Green Hornet*, giving the lead role to Kar Lok. Beyond having two of the most physically gifted martial artists in the same movie though, much of *Martial Arts Master Wong Fei Hung* falls flat. It would be easy to blame it on the patchy storyline, one that fails to really build any significant threat or serious villain to propel it forward. There are times when you can almost imagine director Lee Chiu, the man behind such old school efforts as *Crippled Kung Fu Boxer* and *Kung Fu from Beyond the Grave*, trying to figure out which way to take the plot.

A perfect example is the fact that Ching Ying actually turns out to be an honourable opponent, however when he first bursts onto the screen he ends up driving a spear through one of Fei Hung's classmate's chest, sending him to his death. It's a scene which screams your usual Japanese villain, however it turns out that the killing is literally only there as a plot device, so that Fei Hung has an excuse to fight him in the finale. Despite these strained moments, Kar Lok's budding relationship with Ching Ying's sister, played by Ng Suet Man, is charming enough, and pre-dates the same Chinese-Japanese romantic relationship theme that would be used in *Fist of Legend* by a couple of years.

As I mentioned, it would be easy to blame the movie falling short of being a complete success on the ropery storytelling, however that's really only half the story. The other half is Kar Lok himself. From the mid-90's his lack of leading roles becomes glaringly conspicuous, as he fell back into supporting parts and TV work, and the reason why becomes immediately apparent whenever watching one of his movies. He has amazing physical talents, but what he doesn't have is any real charisma or screen presence. The truth is that, whenever he's onscreen for more than a couple of minutes with no action to perform, things get boring and dull very fast. The same spark that he has whenever his fist or feet are called into action, just wasn't there when it came to acting, which is essential if you want to carry a whole movie on your shoulders.

Martial Arts Master Wong Fei Hung suffers from this issue like his other movies do, and it's perhaps telling that for some scenes he disappears all together, instead having the focus turned to inconsequential supporting characters, ones that at least have some energy and character to them. That being said though, the moment Kar Lok does spring into action, your eyes are immediately glued to the screen. The fight choreography here was done by Lau Kar Leung regular Hsiao Hou, and *Deadful Melody* director Ng Min Kan. Expectedly, the pairing results in a perfect combination of old school meets new wave action. There's occasional use of wirework, both for jumps and power hits, sending the recipients flying into breakable walls and tables with a satisfying level of impact. However, there's also plenty of grounded action,

featuring some fantastic kicking and hand to hand exchanges, thanks not only to Kar Lok, but also the likes of co-stars Suen Kwok Ming and Kong Miu Deng.

While Kar Lok gets to let loose on several occasions during the runtime, I was left with the impression that Ching Ying was somewhat underused. He does get a few fight scenes, however his role as a samurai has all of his fights being performed katana in hand, so we never get to see any of that blistering Wing Chun handwork that was witnessed in the likes of *The Prodigal Son*. His fights also rely on wirework more than others, and I was unable to decide if the reason why his character is wearing a wide straw hat is because he was being doubled in some shots. That being said, if you can put aside your memory of knowing what Ching Ying is capable of, his character is still an entertaining one, and fans of new wave action will definitely have little to complain about.

The promise of a Chin Kar Lok versus Lam Ching Ying match-up in a period kung-fu movie is of course the reason most fans will be checking out *Martial Arts Master Wong Fei Hung*, and the said match-up is indeed delivered. It pits an umbrella wielding Kar Lok against Ching Ying armed with a katana, in the confines of a relatively cramped barn (most likely inspired by the Jet Li versus Yen Shi Kwan fight in *Once Upon a Time in China*, only minus the ladders), and again the choreography goes for a mix of both grounded exchanges and high flying clashes. Surprisingly, the most effective part of the fight is the music. We learn earlier on that Ching Ying trains to the rhythm of his sisters flute playing, and in the finale, as she's left to watch on as her potential suitor and brother battle each other, she begins to play a melancholy tune. The intensity of the choreography, set to the sombre flute playing, elevated the scene to carry a certain level of feeling and emotion, despite it being admittedly undeserved.

All things considered, *Martial Arts Master Wong Fei Hung* is a difficult movie to rate. It has plenty of kung fu action, and it's of a high quality, but it may not be the type of kung fu action audiences are expecting, and in a way that kind of summarises the whole movie. It delivers on what you're expecting, most likely it just doesn't deliver how you were expecting it. For those willing to look past Chin Kar Lok's flat performance, and an occasionally nonsensical plot, then it could well be worth a look, but one thing it definitely isn't, is *Once Upon a Time in China II*. (by Paul Bramhall)

Master Wong vs. Master Wong (Hong Kong, 1993: Lee Lik-Chi) - In this sequel to the parody *Once Upon a Time a Hero in China*, Wong Fei-Hong tires of his life pretending to be a kung fu master, and decides to visit Canton in anonymity, letting his student pretend to be Wong Fei-Hung. A crooked businessman and an upright Wong Fei-Hong admirer complicate matters. Over the course of the movie, at least six different people claim to be the real Wong Fei-Hong, setting up a climactic battle for identity. The always entertaining DoDo Cheng highlights this decent spoof. As with the first movie, there are some extremely funny moments, but they are very hit and miss. Still, some gags are so great, it is probably worth your time.

A zany send up of the Wong Fei Hung series. Silly, silly, silly. A fun romp with smart alek-y sight gags, insane characters and some halfway decent Kung-Fu along the way. Well worth what I paid for the VCD (5.99) A nice change up from the ultra serious Kung Fu you may be digesting now.

On paper, this film looked somewhat interesting. Well, it could have been, I suppose. Firstly, *Once Upon A Time in China* was done so seriously, there should have been bountiful material

to make fun of. Secondly, Carol Cheung, Teresa Mo, and to a lesser extent Ng Man-Tat, are great comic actors. If only it wasn't SO LAME!

Basically this is a poor attempt at mo-lei-tau styled comedy. Most of the skits were simply not funny, and overdone. Everyone acted way too exaggerated. And Eric Tsang-my God, would I do anything to be able to swat him like an annoying fly in this film. Anything at all. (by the HKMDB)

Ming Ghost (Taiwan, 1990: Yau Liu-Juen, Chiu Kang-Chien) - It all seems to be a simple case of rape and murder when Ah Ying (Joey Wong) is found unconscious and her husband Feng Yu Yu tied up and stabbed to death, and the only witness, Xiao Jie (Anthony Wong Yiu-Ming) corroborates this story - which does not make the investigating judge, Ah Ying's father no less, nor the local cop Huo (Chieh Kao) who's secretly in love with Ah Ying, too happy, as it would suggest she's no longer pure. When Ah Ying herself is questioned though, she claims she fended off her would-be rapist by stabbing him in the neck with her comb, and this version of the story rings true when soon afterwards, the key suspect in the case, Xian Yan (Sha Li-Wen) is found with an injury caused by Ah Ying's comb in his neck. He however admits to having tied up Feng Yu Yu and having had sex with his wife, but he claims she offered herself to him, and he didn't kill her husband but was chased away when stabbed by the comb by a person unknown.

Ah Ying's father and Kuo no longer know whom to believe, and before they know it, both Xiao Jie and Xian Yan are killed (by Ah Ying, but neither dad nor lover know that yet), and to finally solve the case, the judge turns to a spiritualist - who has to admit to being a fraud, but nevertheless the spirits of the dead show up and tell an even worse version of what has happened than previously envisioned: Actually, Ah Ying has not only offered herself to Xian Yan but also to Xiao Jie (who had actually stabbed Xian Yan with Ah Ying's comb), and it was Ah Ying herself who killed her husband, because he could never show her the love these two rapists showed to her.

Overcome by shame, her father the judge wants to punish and humiliate her, just like he did with her mother after she had cheated on him ... but the last joke is on him, because it now turns out Ah Ying is no longer among the living but already a demon, stabbed during her rape (or rather non-rape) by accident, but she has come back to the world of the living to make her father repent for what he had done to her mother.

An almost other-worldly movie: Done in the tradition of costume dramas of decades ago, relying heavily on stylized tableaux, fixed camera setups, mask-like heavy makeup, very basic special effects, a deliberately slow pace and intentionally stagey sequences, this film however tells a decidedly fresh, original story with many an interesting twist and turn, and not for a minute it seems as old-fashioned as the almost antiquated directorial techniques would suggest, rather like something that stands completely on its own without anything really comparable to it. Recommended. (by Mike Haberfelner of (re)Search My Trash)

Moon Warriors (Hong Kong, 1992: Sammo Hung) - With the new-wave kung fu boom of the early and mid-90's, it seemed as if any and every Hong Kong star was given the chance to take advantage of the genre. Where there was a lack of fighting prowess on the part of the leading star, there was always enough tricks to give the impression of a confident performer. The result of this period of filmmaking meant that there were some classics produced, some impressive features made and unfortunately some very forgettable forced on the local

audience. *Moon Warriors* could be classed as an impressive feature; although not quite up to the level of a classic, it is still way above average.

Fei (Lau) is a humble fisherman in a small coastal village who enjoys the simplicity of his quiet life. This solitude from the troubles of the country is shattered one morning when he finds himself in the middle of an assassination attempt designed to ensnare a passing prince. Using his considerable skills, Fei helps the royal entourage and guides the injured prince to safety, hiding him in a part of the village. Although from very different backgrounds, the two begin to trust one another and the young fisherman is accepted as part of the fugitive band. The trust is put into operation when Fei is asked to locate and, as it transpires, rescue the daughter of the king of Langling – a woman who was betrothed to the prince from an early age. As the prince's vicious brother continues to hunt the group, Fei finds himself attracted to Moon (Mui), his new charge. Meanwhile the fleeing royal discovers that there may well be a traitor in the camp and it could even be one of his closest protectors. The emotional turmoil felt throughout the camp is pushed to the fore-front when the enemy closes in and targets the lives of the entire village.

Moon Warriors stands out from the crowded market of new-wave swordplay films for a few very good reasons. The immediate thing that strikes the viewer is the quality of the action; although wires are used in some instances, there is still an abundance of quality choreography that remains firmly on the ground. The success of these sublime moments is largely down to Sammo Hung's stellar direction – a reminder of the fact that few can compare to him on his day. Instead of just relying on popular new-wave gimmicks, Sammo pushes each of the actors to their limit and, even though there is liberal use of stunt doubles, the effect is impressive to behold. Coupled with this is a storyline that starts off in familiar fashion, but quickly becomes more and more engrossing. The emotional nature of the characters' dilemmas means that *Moon Warriors* is not just dependant on its first-rate action. By the end of this ultimately tragic tale, the viewer cannot help but be absorbed by the film's power. Each of the four popular stars acquit themselves very well in this unfamiliar genre (even though Mui seems a bit too old for the part she's playing) and again increase the overall power of the finished production. As sometimes befalls new-wave swordplay films there are some moments which are bizarre and verging on the daft, but these are few and far between. *Moon Warriors* is a praiseworthy effort from a director of definite quality; it's strongly recommended to all fans of those involved in it. (by Andrew Saroch of Far East Films)

New Dragon Inn (Hong Kong, 1992: Raymond Lee) – aka *Dragon Inn* - During the Ming Dynasty, the Eunuchs of the Eastern Chamber hold the real power and are totally ruthless. This is demonstrated in the way they kill prisoners by getting them to ride away on horses while they shoot at them with arrows with strange names.

Seeing him as an impediment on their way to power, the Eunuchs kill the Military Secretary Yang and then use his children as bait to try and trap Chow, an ally of the deceased.

The children are rescued, but not by Chow. It is Mo-Yan (Brigitte Lin) who rescues them with the help of the soldiers who were meant to be guarding them. They also get attacked by the Eunuch's Black Dragon Arrow Soldiers.

They manage to escape and they find themselves at the Dragon Inn, a meeting place/hidey hole/triad hangout. It is run by the cunning Jade King (Maggie Cheung) and also hides secrets in the form of its buns that contain 'Spicy Meat'.

During the night Jade King sneaks into where Mo-Yan is having a bath. They then both try to out-do each other by grabbing clothes from their bodies and Jade King ends up next to naked on the roof.

It is then she meets Chow (Tony Leung Kar Fei) and she immediately falls for him, but is disappointed when she finds he is with Mo-Yan. This doesn't deter her however and she starts scheming to claim him for her own.

While the Eunuch's soldiers are searching the inn during the night, two of Mo-Yan's group hide in the basement where they see the Barbarian Dao, who is the cook and also accounts for why there are never any bodies found when someone goes missing from the inn.

Seeing how desperate Chow is to escape, Jade King takes advantage of him as she wants a man. Chow sees through her plan and tells her he wants a traditional wedding. She gets her own back by nicking the flute from Chow that belonged to Mo-Yan.

The leader of the Eunuch's soldiers, Cha, agrees to be the elder and give away Jade, but he also wants to see what they are doing in her room as he suspects they are trying to get away.

Of all the Hong Kong movies I've wanted to see, this is the one I was most looking forward to. It was first recommended to me by a friend from Singapore during 1997.

The scenes in the inn reminded me of *From Dusk to Dawn* and a lot of old style westerns. What this movie has that the others don't however, is one of the most incredible action sequences I have ever seen. The final scenes have some of the best action I have seen in a Hong Kong movie.

The cast is excellent, in particular Maggie Cheung and Tony Leung. Even the bad guys put in great performances and are really evil, but very stylish also.

What I particularly liked about this movie was the way it built the tension during the scenes in the inn. The relationships between the characters in these scenes are also great as the people involved know what is coming and are just trying to get by in trying circumstances. In one scene it is almost like the characters can read the mind of the audience when they get sick of waiting and start a fight.

The setting of the inn is really great also. It reminded me of the old 'bi-level restaurant' set as seen in the grand old Shaw Brothers productions such as *Golden Swallow* and which also recently appeared in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. As with all great settings, it becomes a character in itself and has some surprises that contribute to the plot of the movie.

As I said before, the action scenes are some of the best I have seen in this type of movie - from the dramatic opening scenes to the intense personal affairs within the confines of the inn.

I thought the opening titles were great and really suited the style of the movie. The soundtrack is very dramatic and memorable also. What I remember most about it is the Middle-Eastern influence that I found really interesting.

I would recommend this movie if you liked the epic action of Hero and the love story of *House of Flying Daggers* in a different setting. (by Tim's Hong Kong Movie Reviews)

New Legend of Shaolin (Hong Kong, 1994: Wong Jing, Corey Yuen) – aka Legend of the Red Dragon - During the first half of the 1990s, Hong Kong was wire-fu crazy. It seems like all you had to do to get your movie made was show up at a studio waving around a napkin with “guys in robes fly around, then there’s a fart joke” scrawled on it. Even if the studio already had ten movies exactly like yours in production, producers saw no reason they couldn’t add one more to the pile. *New Legend of Shaolin*, starring Jet Li when he was the undisputed king of being hoisted around on wires, is the epitome of mediocre 1990s wuxia. It’s bad but not enragingly bad. It’s fight scenes are terrible but not “really terrible.” And as was almost always par for the course, the tone jumps wildly and without any transition from slapstick fart comedy to atrociously overwrought melodrama. It’s a textbook case of by-the-numbers, don’t-give-a-shit Hong Kong film making from Wong Jing, the master of by-the-numbers, don’t-give-a-shit Hong Kong film making.

New Legend of Shaolin is basically an adaptation of the Japanese *Lone Wolf and Cub* series, with a grim-faced, stoic Jet Li starring as Hung Hei-Kwun, a warrior supreme who is on the lam with his kungfu-powered son, played by 1990s martial arts wunderkind Xie Miao, who never became the star everyone assumed he would become, thanks to half-assed movies like *New Legend of Shaolin* killing off the martial arts movie market. Hung and Son spend their time wandering town to town, solving problems and stoically eating dinner. Meanwhile, in the background, an evil organization called the Heaven and Earth Society, lead by a crazed ex-monk named Poison Juice Monster (bald, eyebrowless Ji Chun-Hua, who played a screaming, crazy bad guy in roughly a trillion movies) — the very man who betrayed Shaolin to the Ch’ings and orchestrated the burning of the temple — is trying to track down five Shaolin pre-teens who happen to have pieces of a treasure map tattooed on their backs so that Wong Jing can put in a lot of jokes where little kids show their bare asses and fart in each others’ faces.

Needless to say, Hung and Son will end up protecting the kids and settling old scores with Poison Juice Monster, who is one of those kungfu bad guys whose every line is a scream or villainous laughter that goes on for like half an hour while he punches lumber or beheads people. 1990s wuxia villains love to yell and punch wood almost as much as they loved to laugh while beheading people to that weird “slicing flesh” sound effect that is used in like every kungfu film and sounds nothing like slicing flesh. It’s more like, I don’t know, someone scrapping two pieces of metal together or something. You know the sound effect.

Because Wong Jing doesn’t like to make movies that don’t denigrate women in some way (this is a man who thinks rape is hilarious), we also have to endure harpyish con artists Red Bean (gorgeous queen of shitty Wong Jing movies, Chingmy Yau) and her even more grating and obnoxious mother (Hong Kong movie veteran Deannie Yip). Pretty much every single thing they do is reprehensible, but I guess in the eyes of Wong Jing, this is just women being women, and unrepentant greed, selfishness, extortion, narcissism, theft, and attempted murder is exactly the right combination of feminine charms Red Bean needs to melt Hung’s stony heart. The arrival of Red Bean and her mom allows Wong Jing to indulge in endless scenes of profoundly terrible slapstick comedy that are so unfunny that you’ll actually find yourself praying for the arrival of another sloppily executed scene of Jet Li or Xie Miao being swung around like marionettes — even though these fight scenes are sort of lame, even by lame 1990s wuxia standards.

The action was directed by Cory Yuen, who proved himself adept at directing hard-hitting, real-world martial arts/stunts movies as long as Sammo Hung or Jackie Chan was on hand to help him out. In the wuxia world, with a producer/director as sleazy and untalented as Wong Jing, Yuen flounders, serving up wire-fu antics that represent the very worst the wire-fu trend had to offer. People are flung around without any regard at all for realism — and by “realism,” I

mean wuxia realism, a sort of realism where you can shoot lasers from your fists or jump up in the air, and in mid-air propel yourself off your own hand to somehow jump even further into the air. Even by those physics-free standards of realism, the fights in *New Legend of Shaolin* are ludicrous, jumbled, and boring. If you were new to wire-fu, maybe you could naively consider them outrageous and dazzling, but for anyone who has ever seen wire-fu done right — *Once Upon a Time in China*, *Swordsman* and *Swordsman 2*, to name just a few that all also starred Jet Li — or even adequately — *Iron Monkey*, *Fong Sai Yuk* — it's easy to recognize the action in *New Legend of Shaolin* as particularly weak.

The acting is equally ham-fisted. Jet Li, who possesses an abundance of charisma when he's allowed to show it, drifts through the movie playing the honorable stick-up-the-ass hero with almost no appeal. He could redeem himself with decent fight scenes, but a back injury suffered during the filming of *Once Upon a Time in China* meant that Jet spent the rest of the 1990s not being able to deliver the sort of action he did in that movie. Young Xie Miao was supposed to be another mainland China wushu prodigy, heir to the throne of — hey, Jet Li! Unfortunately, he arrived on the scene when the quality of martial arts movies was in decline. Although he's obviously got skills, he spends this and most of his other movies doing nothing but being yanked around on wires while scowling.

Chingmy Yau also possesses an abundance of charisma, but she spent almost her entire career making terrible movies and so never really got a chance to be much more than a hot chick in shitty films. Both she and Deannie Yip try to out mug one another, whether it's overplaying broad comedy or wailing and flailing around in tragic scenes. The bad guy? He just laughs and screams and punches timbers and, for some reason, tears around in a armored dune buggy. I guess that's cool, sort of.

As for the writing — well, it's a Wong Jing film. He usually craps out the script on his way to the shoot, concerning himself more with making sure everything trendy is crammed into the movie than he does with writing an even halfway coherent movie. The end result is a mish mash of Lone Wolf and Cub, generic period piece wire-fu, diarrhea jokes, and grossly overwrought melodrama that begs the audience for tears while deserving nothing but contempt for its clumsy hamminess.

New Legend of Shaolin is pretty much a terrible movie all the way around. It's status as a cheap and shoddy rush job is evident in nearly every aspect. Wong Jing, as much as I find him a thoroughly loathesome film maker, could on occasion make really good movies. He just usually never bothered, because it was way easier and more profitable to just churn out junky nonsense like *New Legend of Shaolin*. Hong Kong was basically drunk on Hong Kong in the 1990s, and fans both in Hong Kong and abroad would pay to watch just about anything. When I first saw this in 1994, I was still excited to see just about anything from Hong Kong. As such, I was pretty lenient in my assessments of them. Even back then, though, *New Legend of Shaolin* struck me as crass, dull exploitation. If I don't say that I hate it, it's only because it's such a lame movie that it's not worth the effort of hating. It managed to be just barely watchable the first time, when I was young and forgiving. Revisiting it years later, I found that a half-remembered single viewing back in 1994 was probably more than this film deserved. (by Keith Allison of Teleport City)

Once Upon a Time: A Hero in China (Hong Kong, 1992: Lee Lik-Chi) - Singer/actor Alan Tam spoofs the the martial arts legend Wong Fei-Hung, giving the movie a comedic twist where Fei-Hung is being challenged to duels by the crafty Ken Shek (Tony Leung Ka Fai). However, Fei-Hung actually knows more about cooking than martian arts and, therefore, relies on his

"disciples" Porky Wing (Eric Tsang), Leung Foon (Simon Yam) and So (Man Tat Ng) to train him to fight. Meanwhile, Shek has purchased opium from shady businessman Indiana Jones (Paul Fonoroff) and plans to rule the town with the drug profits.

Like previous Fei-Hung movies, this film has plenty of martial arts action and breathtaking battles, including the fight between Fei-Hung's disciples and Shek. However, it is the slapstick comedy (at times nonsensical) and goofy humor that take center stage in the film, providing you with loads of fun. From So going berserk after tasting a bit of opium to the awkward chemistry between Fei-Hung and his love interest Aunt Yee (Teresa Mo), this movie is pretty captivating.

The plot is also pretty solid and gains momentum as the movie progresses and has classic good guy vs. bad guy elements. There is an all-star cast, including cameos from actors from the original classic Wong Fei-Hung series Kien Shih and Gwa-Pau Sai. Other than overindulgence in goofiness in a few scenes, this movie is a good one for a laugh. (by ollie-suave007 of IMDB)

Once Upon a Time in China (Hong Kong, 1991: Tsui Hark) - I would consider *Once Upon a Time in China* (OUATIC) the second turning point in my movie career, not just because it was successful, but because it gave me a new sense of what makes a good action movie. The lessons I learned on that set forever changed the way I viewed fight scenes.

When I had begun making movies in the 1980's, the other actors and I knew nothing about the process. Take the first two *Shaolin Temple* films, for example. When it came to fight scenes, the director simply asked us to take everything we'd learned in the past ten years of wushu training and throw it together. We didn't know how or if it would work on screen, but we blocked out our own fights. After we had practiced it a few times, the director filmed it.

Starting with the next two films, the producers hired somebody to choreograph our fight scenes, so I started to take a much smaller role in this aspect of filmmaking. Whatever sequences the action directors designed, I learned and performed.

But *OUATIC*, the first of the Wong Fei-hung movies, gave me the chance to work with Tsui Hark, an outstanding director with an impressive history of martial arts movies. A few weeks before we started filming, he told me to come by his house to work out the action sequences. As I sat down, he popped a tape into the VCR and told me to watch.

To my surprise, it was a nature documentary.

First, we saw a lion, contemplating its next meal, stalking to and fro in the long grass. At every sound, it would tense and press its body to the ground. Pause for a few seconds, then take a few more steps. Crouch again.

Then the camera shifted to focus on a herd of antelopes nearby, drinking water from a stream. Whenever they heard a rustle, they would perk their heads up to sniff the air.

Nothing.

Bend down to lap more water.

Was that another rustle?

Their ears twitched. They listened carefully.

With agonizing slowness, the lion crept out of the grass...then sprang out, creating a panicked stampede in the herd. The lion chose one antelope, pursued it relentlessly and ran it down.

As I recall, it didn't leave much of an impression on me. What was happening on screen was pretty thrilling, to be sure, but I had seen nature documentaries like this before.

When we finished watching, Tsui Hark stood up and said, "Okay? How about it?"

"How about what?" I asked, confused.

"The action scenes that we just went over."

"What are you talking about? We never even started discussing the action scenes."

Then he said: "You know, the action in a martial arts movie is a display of physical skill. But capturing the disturbing tension of the moment just before a battle--that's pretty important, too."

Only then did I realize that the documentary we had just watched might have some relevance to the movie I was about to film.

"Play it again," I said. And this time, we sat and carefully watched how the lion hunted down and killed its prey. I began to see the details: the lion as it begins to feel hunger in its belly, and the expression in its eyes as it stealthily starts to seek out its victim. And the antelope--how intensely it scans the area, and the fearful feeling as it returns to its drinking...

Long before anything violent happens, the viewer is already feeling very anxious. You're watching intently, you're imagining yourself in the position of the antelope or the lion, and the suspense can be pretty nerve-wracking. When the lion finally makes its move--leaping out and wrestling down the antelope--it's over very quickly. But the tension generated beforehand is very important. Same thing with *QUATRIC*. Look at the two main characters right before they begin fighting. Circling each other. The wind, the fire, the expressions in their eyes. You know that a fierce battle is already underway. And the inspiration for that scene came from the nature documentary! That's how I learned to view fight scenes from a different perspective. No longer were they just a series of physical movements: this strike, that block, etc. You had to take a step back and see the emotions.

That wasn't all I learned from Tsui Hark ...

Occasionally, the script demanded that our characters perform bizarre and improbable feats. Case in point: Wong Fei-hung's "No Shadow Kick." A few of us protested, feeling that the audience would find it impossible to believe that a person could land seven kicks in mid-air. But Tsui Hark insisted on it. So we all had a lively argument about this issue. Of course, the director's vision always wins out, so we agreed to respect his decision. But I remember asking him, "Don't you think that this kick is a little too exaggerated?"

He replied: "You've forgotten one thing. Once the audience begins to sympathize with the character, he can't do anything wrong. Even if he does something slightly superhuman, they're willing to suspend their disbelief. The audience is already wrapped up in the character and his story; it's not like they're watching the No Shadow Kick out of context. So when I plot out each

move, I often ask myself: 'If I were watching this as a member of the audience, would I be able to keep up with the idea that is being conveyed in that instant?' They might miss it altogether. Remember, a fight scene may take one to two months to choreograph and film, but the audience experiences it in a few seconds. It's never just a matter of the physical movements."

These ideas had a huge impact on the way I approached the movies I would make--and the action sequences that I helped create--in the 1990's. I had the chance to put these methods into practice in each movie, and each time, I learned a little more. Even now, while blocking out a fight, I still make a point of pulling back a little to think: if I were watching this for the first time, would I understand what this fight scene is really about?

Of course, *OUATIC* was also another type of test for me. Up to that point, I had made six movies, and on each one, I had sustained some kind of serious injury.

Shaolin Temple 1: broken leg.

Shaolin Temple 2: sprained neck.

Shaolin Temple 3: sprained back.

Born to Defense: broken nose.

The Master: broken wrist.

Once Upon a Time in China: broken left leg and ankle.

Looking back at this disturbing pattern caused me to ask myself some serious questions: How important was this career to me? Was it really such a good idea to keep making movies? I was getting a little apprehensive. Honestly, when you break a limb or wrench something in every film, you start to worry about what might happen the next time. Was my luck bad, or was this just my fate? It cast a shadow on everything else.

I wrestled with this question for quite a while, but in the end, I decided: "Alright, well, since you still like wushu and movies, you might as well keep forging ahead." And as it turned out, the injury from *OUATIC* was the last major one of my career. I haven't gotten hurt in a serious way on any of the films that I did in the 1990's.

But the old injuries still bother me!

OUATIC kicked off a great era for Hong Kong action cinema. And it taught me one final lesson about filmmaking: many things that you believe to be true today may not be true tomorrow, and that's because the audience is constantly evolving and getting smarter.

Action directors will tell you that the movies have exhausted the physical possibilities of fight scenes and stunts. There's a limit to what the human body can do, and we've pretty much seen it all. However, the context within which the action takes place, and the connotations of those movements, can be a never-ending source of innovation. Just like with music. Think about it: how many centuries have people been writing music using the same seven notes: do re mi fa so la ti? And yet we still manage to create beautiful and interesting compositions. Likewise, if the repertoire of physical movements has been thoroughly catalogued, does that mean that there are no more action scenes to film?

I believe that there will always be more.

In action, just like in music, the basic elements themselves do not change. If you are a musician, you need only be diligent in varying and composing those seven notes to create fresh sounds. Likewise, we who work in film must use ingenuity to arrange that set of physical

movements into scenes that have the power to captivate the imagination, as we saw in *The Matrix* or *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. The day will never come that action has nothing left to say. Movies like these prove it. Old things perceived from a new angle take on a new flavor. And I say this because...music is still being written! Art is infinitely inexhaustible, if you have the creativity to make it new.

On every movie, I make sure that the action director and I remind ourselves that we are always capable of creating something fresh and exciting. If we apply ourselves to understanding the story and how the action feeds it, there is always some new breakthrough waiting to be discovered. And we must discover it. We must move forward. I will never believe that we've reached the end, that there's nothing left to try. There's always something more. (by Jet Li)

Once Upon a Time in China 2 (Hong Kong, 1992: Tsui Hark) - Wong Fei Hung, along with his beloved Aunt Yee and student Foon, travel to Canton for a medical conference. Unfortunately, this is a time in which Canton is in chaos. The foreigner-hating White Lotus Cult holds power over the city. Meanwhile, a pro-democracy group plans a revolution, hoping to make China a republic. The local authorities are overwhelmed with foreign policy, while trying to hold off the White Lotus cult. When news of the democratic revolution comes along, the commander makes it his number one priority to stop it - even if he must take inappropriate and extreme measures. Wong Fei Hung will find himself in the middle and must help drive off the White Lotus clan, while helping his newfound friends in the pro-democracy group.

Sequels seldom live up to the original, especially when the original is an epic, timeless piece like the original "Once Upon A Time in China". Of course, there are exceptions (*Terminator 2* and *Drunken Master II* come to mind). While *OUATIC II* certainly does not have the impact of the original, it is a worthy successor that deserves to sit right next to the original *OUATIC* in any fan's collection.

Much like the original *One Upon A Time In China*, the focus in this sequel is again on the storytelling before the action. The dual plotline is weaved fairly, with both major struggles being given a decent balance. If you appreciated the way all the subplots were dealt with in the original, you will be right at home with *OUATIC II*. Again, the film sticks to Tsui Hark's elaborate style, both visually and thematically. Take notice of how elaborate the White Lotus ceremony scenes are or how chaotic the streets of Canton are. All true to Hark's style.

Overall, the themes in this film are not as heavy as the ones in the original. There are still some basic themes about (again) foreign influence, the value of time, abuse of power, and loyalty. The humor in this film is a little more blatant and more widely used. In particular, Foon's character is now very much a heavy source of comic relief, with his nervous crush on Aunt Yee and his goofy responses to new situations. The humor gives the film a slightly more lighthearted feel than the original, although some may argue that Foon has become more annoying than in the original. In the end, the style of the original comes through with flying colors again, but this film is certainly not quite as epic.

Performances from Jet Li and Rosamund Kwan are just as solid as the original. Jet Li still maintains the serious and wise demeanor of Wong Fei Hung, while Rosamund Kwan manages to truly convey her "western" style and her feelings toward Fei Hung. In this film, character development is much less of a focus, probably with expectation that the viewer is comfortable with the characters from viewing the original. Nonetheless, the performances from Li and Kwan are enough to show the personalities of their characters even to a viewer who has no experience with the original. Foon's character is certainly not up to par with the

performance of Yuen Biao, who played him in the original. Still, the part is much more "silly" here and to that end the performance is more than adequate. All the other performances are solid with the exception, of course, of the foreign actors (who, as a rule, are almost always bad in HK films).

For many, the fight scenes in *OUATIC II* are some of the most memorable. We get to see two very noteworthy match-ups between Jet Li and Donnie Yen. These fights, in particular, are the highlights of the action in the film. The first, a stick fight in the middle of a bunch of poles, is very exciting and visually perfect. Yuen Woo Ping is at the helm of the fight scenes this time, and as always, he shows his stuff proudly. The style of the film's action stays much in line with that of the original - so if you liked the action there, you'll be happy here. The only complaint is that the balancing game with the tables, during the match up with the White Lotus, gets a little tiring after a while. I'm all for wire-fu - but at times, they can push a gag a little too far. Luckily, that is a small complaint and that match-up goes on to greater things far beyond the table balancing.

So, *Once Upon A Time In China II* is not as epic as the original. One certainly does not come out feeling as much inspiration as with the first. Nonetheless, Tsui Hark has weaved yet another excellent tale that should keep the viewers engaged and is certainly not hindered by the brilliant performances of the leads. Action is solid with the particularly memorable match between Li and Yen. So, any fan of the original should pick up this sequel immediately. It may not be quite as good as the original, but that is a hell of a legacy to live up to. *OUATIC II* is still heads above the rest of the pack and is a worthy follow-up to the groundbreaking original. (by Hell Ninja Commando)

Once Upon a Time in China 3 (Hong Kong, 1993: Tsui Hark) - In a bid to demonstrate the strength of Chinese resolve to foreigners, the Dowager Empress calls for a martial arts/lion dancing tournament between the local schools. Ironically this competition divides the people and the factions fight amongst themselves, allowing foreign invaders a greater foothold on China. Fortunately, Wong Fei-hung (Jet Li) arrives in Beijing and soon sets about resolving both the physical and political conflicts.

As the third installment in the *Once Upon a Time in China* series, it is understandable that many Hong Kong film fans regard this film inferior to its incredibly popular predecessors, especially as the third film takes elements of the series in slightly different directions. The first of these differences is that of setting. Wong Fei-hung travels to Beijing to meet his farther Wong Kei-ying (Lau Shun) and inform him of his upcoming marriage to Peony (Rosamund Kwan). The decision to actually shoot in Beijing lends itself to the film, placing it on a grander scale to those previous, using the huge sound stages with extravagant sets and complex scenes of lion dancing. Consequently, the rich and colorful cinematography present in the first two films seem effortlessly retained for the third, underlining Tsui Hark's reputation for high production value.

There is also a change in choreographer, from Yuen Wo-ping and his brothers to Yuen Tak (no relation, however Bey Logan states in his commentary that the action choreographer was Yuen Bun, as is often the case the action duties were probably shared). Regardless, there is a shift in action style. For the most part, Fei-hung deals with multiple opponents of inferior skill, as opposed to a more threatening single opponent such as Iron Robe in the first film. Fei-hung does have brief encounters with Club Foot (described as Iron Foot in the subtitles), played suitably by the talented martial artist and action director Xiong Xin-xin (AKA Hung Yan-yan). Perhaps to the disappointment of most, Fei-hung regards Club Foot as a nuisance rather than a

threat and only defends himself rather than seeking to defeat him fully, thus allowing for the redemption of Club Foot later in the film. However, Xin-xin is allowed to show his stuff in a ferocious wire-fuelled exchange with Lau Shun as Wong Kei-ying early on in the film, opposing Wong's restrained 'southern fist' with Club Foot's extravagant 'northern leg.'

The physical danger that Wong Fei-hung faces in the action scenes stem mainly from the environment in which he is placed rather than an opponent's specific skill or style. During one confrontation he finds himself trapped in a tea house where the floor is oiled so he cannot maintain his stance. Another action scene sees Fei-hung wade through a sea of battling swordsmen armed only with his coat. While there is clearly little in the way of contact in this scene, Jet Li's form, the camera work, editing, and the stirring Fei-hung theme music makes the scene just as exhilarating as the one-on-one showdowns we are accustomed to. Lion dancing features heavily in the film and in much of the action, including the finale that has Fei-hung competing in a dangerous Lion Dance competition. For many, this disturbs the pacing of the film, leaving it unbalanced without a traditional fight at the end. Still, one cannot take anything away from the choreography of the lion dances, especially on such a large scale and with the wire work and the inclusion of spears, blades, arrows and fire. Besides, for some, the absence of a wire fu finale may make a refreshing change.

The main two villains in the film are Tomansky (John Wakefield) and Chiu Tim-ba and neither threaten Fei-hung physically the way Iron Robe or Donnie Yen's corrupt Government official did in the previous films. Instead the 'enemy' opposing Fei-hung has more to do with what these characters represent politically. Tomansky plays a Russian agent plotting the assassination of a Chinese official while attempting to steal Peony away from Fei-hung. Chiu Tim-ba is a local triad leader concerned with his own reputation and wealth. These two villains demonstrate the foreign imperialism and domestic ignorance respectively which Fei-hung is forced to contend with, as well as his own personal issues concerning his coming to terms with the changing times and his relationship with Peony.

Those who have seen the previous films will recognize the themes of Chinese identity and old tradition verses new technology and in this film they are only extended and embellished rather than resolved or replaced. Yet I would still have to recommend this film, especially to fans of the first two movies who already have an invested interest in the main characters and their development. While I accept lion dancing will not appeal to everyone, I would argue that what makes the *Once Upon a Time in China* films stand out from other period martial arts films, and subsequently makes *Once Upon a Time in China III* worthwhile viewing, is that these films are not simply the sum of their action scenes. Here we see Wong Fei-hung meet his farther and extend his reputation to China's capital, we see him perform for the motion camera in a nice self-reflexive scene and the film continues the blossoming yet problematic relationship between Fei-hung and Peony, including, for what it's worth, their first onscreen kiss. For me, the slow-motion scene where Fei-hung swings down from a building with Peony in his arms, glancing triumphantly over his shoulder at the dejected Tomansky is priceless.

Once Upon a Time in China III may not be the masterpiece that the first film was, nor does it contain the same level of action created by Yuen Wo-ping for the second, but it works well as a sequel, continuing various aspects of the first two films, slotting perfectly into the series despite its minor differences. Perhaps, it should be said that the film works better as part of a series, rather than a film unto itself, however this film alone still stands tall during a period flooded with period martial arts films inspired by *Once Upon a Time in China*. (by Michael Pratt of Kung Fu Cinema)

Once Upon a Time in China IV (Hong Kong, 1993: Yuen Bun) - Made in the same year as part 3, and following almost directly on, it was a bit of a surprise when Jet Li (after falling out with Tsui Hark) abdicated his WFH throne, and the mantle was passed to the younger, extremely talented Wu Shu player Vincent Zhao (also known as Chiu Man Cheuk). To me, Zhao is equally adept as Jet at filling the role of Wong, as although he is young, he has the physical grace and sombre demeanour needed to carry it off. Sometimes even seeming more suitable for the role, as he seems to exude a greater air of responsibility.

The plot follows two distinct lines. Firstly, after his heroics at winning the Golden Lion Medal in part 3, he is asked to compete in a new competition featuring super-powered lions from various countries (most notably Germany!), and they fear that China will lose face if defeated. While this is an ongoing problem, so too are the ladies of the Red Lotus clan, whose aim is to remove all foreigners. Unfortunately, Wong, in saving some Gwailo's, becomes a target of their fury and further problems ensue. As with the first 3 instalments, much of the plot is driven by important events in China's history and filled with both overt and subtle political comment.

Action-wise, Zhao is the physical equal of Jet Li, at least in terms of his Wu Shu and acrobatic ability, and gets to impress with some excellent moves. The choreography is not as slick as part 2, obviously suffering without Woo Ping's involvement, however many of the action set pieces are extremely well shot and entertaining. Unfortunately, the finale is a slight let-down since we see Hung Yan Yan, Vincent Zhao, Billy Chow and Chin Kar Lok take part in what, on paper, is a dream battle. This is not the case and it is a damp squib compared to what I was expecting.

The action (ladder fight excepted) is equal to part 1, but not the dramatic element, and it is certainly not the equal of part 2 for fight choreography. As a result it falls slightly behind earning a respectable 4 stars. If you liked the first 3, you will definitely enjoy this too, and will not feel your time has been wasted in tracking it down. It is a shame that Zhao has not been given more quality roles, as outings in recent films such as *Body Weapon*, *Fist Power* and *The Blacksheep Affair* have not fulfilled the potential seen in this film and other quality productions like *Green Snake* and *Fong Sai Yuk*. It seems as though he, like Jet used to, has trouble adapting to modern day actioners, and I hope it is only a matter of time before he shines again. (by Tony Ryan of Far East Films)

Once Upon a Time in China V (Hong Kong, 1994: Tsui Hark) - Wong Fei Hung. There's a bunch of names synonymous with playing the folklore hero on screen. None so famous as kung fu cinema legend and all round icon, Jet Li. Jet Li pumped out three *Once Upon a Time in China* movies before dropping the genre and heading off to greener pastures (he would later return for one final outing). Well, when Jet Li packed it all in, director Tsui Hark looked for the next best thing. In doing so, he came across the little known Vincent Zhao. Zhao shared a similar Wushu background to Li and had portrayed a pretty nifty villain to Jet Li's hero in *Fong Sai Yuk*. Long story short, Vincent Zhao became the next Wong Fei Hung.

I'll admit, I haven't seen fourth *OUATIC* film. I haven't managed to get my grubby mitts on it...yet. So, it was with excitement that I cracked open my German *OUATIC V* DVD and popped it in the player. The film starts off like any Tsui Hark/Wong Fei Hung effort. Granted, I may not have been in the loop as there seems to have been some sort of established romantic angle between Fei Hung and "Aunt May". She's Aunt Yee's (Rosamund Kwan) sister.

That whole love triangle thing is weird. It kind of goes nowhere but does allow for a particularly clever Austin Powers-esque shadow sight gag. At the end of the day, Fei Hung loves Aunt Yee and vice versa. Aunt May doesn't really add much to the mix. She's just kind

of...there. I get that she's meant to cause some kind of romantic friction, but I feel like it's either go big or go home and this film is just kind of flimsy with the love entanglement stuff.

But it's not really love we're looking for in a *OUATIC* movie, is it? It's people getting kicked in the face. With lots and lots and lots of wires. Well...if that's your bag, you're in for a treat. The premise of *OUATIC V* is simple. There are pirates. Bad pirates. They're pillaging ships and threatening to steal all the rice from...well...a rice salesman. Wong Fei Hung and his gaggle of friends wander into town and we all know how it goes from there, right?

The action comes at a nice rate. Nothing mind blowing, but there are plenty of fight scenes and most of them are fairly lengthy. There is something odd about the film's action, however. Foon, Butcher Wing, Club Foot, even So all get to lay down some sweet kung fu law. Wong Fei Hung? Not so much. Weirdly, Vincent Zhao really isn't showcased that much early on in the film. sure, he gets a few moments here and there but Xiong Xin-Xin as Club Foot really gets the limelight for the first half of the film. As do the others. Wong Fei Hung plays second fiddle during the fights. Or at least that's how I felt.

As you might imagine, it's wires abound in this one. It's par for the course. But, as far as wires go, this is good stuff. Yes, it's silly in places but if you can suspend your disbelief, this is a good old wire-fu romp. Plenty of lovely kicks although very little hand-to-hand exchanges (very little). But who needs punching when you can twirl in the air and kick twelve people in the face, right? Well...I kind of do. I was a bit saddened that there were so few up-close exchanges. All the moves were big and brash. Nothing small and intimate. I didn't hate it but I wasn't overly pleased by it either. I was in an unusual "enjoyment limbo".

The plot progresses. Fei Hung fights some ore pirates, stumbles across their gold and goes toe-to-toe with some bizarre, duct covered father figure to the head of the pirates. It's actually one of the best fights in the film as it finally gives Zhao a chance to shine. It's this fight that really kicks off the focus turning to him. But it's kind of the second-to-last fight.

Speaking of fights, there's something glaringly new about this outing...GUNS. Loads of guns. We're talking John Woo style dives, crazy reloads, shotguns, six-shooters that fire eighty two rounds. all that good stuff. *Hard Boiled* was 1992 and this was 1994. I'm not sure if this was a genuinely influenced by Woo or not but it kind of feels like it. People get shot a lot in this film. But it's combined with martial arts so it's actually kind of cool. Sometimes very cool. The lead pirated has this weird Guandao type thing that also shoots bullets. It's an interesting twist on a classic weapon. The film really blends kung fu and gunplay together pretty well. In fact, So (buck teeth and all) is a veritable beast with handguns in this film. It's great watching him pump bullets into his enemies as he dives over barrels and under ladders.

While the plot of the film is simple, there are some added dramatics, some quirky romance moments and a nice focus on a number of characters. The comedic beats don't always hit but there are enough to elicit a titter here and there.

All in all, a solid film. Some unusual action choices, sure, but it's never enough to dampen what's on screen. It's all pretty damn enjoyable. As good as Jet Li's *OUATIC* films? Hmm...maybe not better than the first two but on the same level as the third...if not better. It's big, silly fun that doesn't take itself too seriously at all. There's enough here for all genre fans although haters of wire-work should stay a mile away.

Xiong Xin-Xin is an utter highlight here and I don't know why the bloke didn't get more roles. His kicks are phenomenal and he was a pretty great actor back then too. But everyone gets

their time to shine, even if Wong Fei Hung himself doesn't do an awful lot until the last thirty minutes.

It's well worth picking up a DVD of this one. It's a nice addition to the *Once Upon a Time in China* pantheon. Fans of 90's style martial arts action or just fans of the franchise in general are sure to get some enjoyment out of it. (by Drunken Monk of KFF)

Once Upon a Time in China and America (Hong Kong, 1997: Sammo Hung) - There are a few series of martial arts movies which have left an imprint on the genre, one that will be felt forever. One is Jackie Chan's *Police Story* series, which contain some of the best stunt/martial arts action sequences in the history of the genre. There's the *The Matrix* series, which popularized the blend of Hong Kong martial arts choreography and CGI. One of the greatest series is the *Once Upon a Time in China* (hereafter referred to as "OUATIC") series.

The series has, up to this point, consisted of six movies, one prequel, one spin-off/parody, and several TV series. In addition, there have been several knock-offs made following the success of the series. The OUATIC films are probably best known for kicking off the 1990s "wire-fu" craze and putting Jet Li into stardom. In addition to that, the movies (at least the first three) are evidence that martial arts movies can have great acting, music, storylines, etc. while still having excellent fight scenes.

The focal character of the series is Chinese folk hero Wong Fei-Hung. Wong was a Chinese healer and kung fu expert during the late 19th century and early 20th century. His kung fu style was hung-gar, a style which was created by Hung Hey-Kwoon (a character that Jet Li has also played) and was based on the animal styles, especially the tiger and crane techniques. Wong was a great martial artist; he had the nickname of "King of the Lions" due to his prowess in the Lion Dance. He also perfected a technique known as the "No-Shadow Kick," a kick so fast that you could not even see the shadow of the leg moving.

A lot of films have been made about Wong Fei-Hung. Most recently, Sammo Hung appeared in Jackie Chan's *Around the World in 80 Days* as Master Wong. The OUATIC movies were historical epics. They told of the perilous times and conflicts that China passed through during the era of Western colonization and the weakening of the Qing Dynasty. They were great examples of how Chinese filmmakers were masters of mixing genres: action, romance, comedy, drama, tragedy, and historical fiction. The films stand as testament to what a talented Chinese director is capable of doing.

The first two films are generally considered the best of the series and the third doesn't lag very far behind. After the third movie, Jet Li had a falling out with Golden Harvest and Zhao Wen-Zhuo, another Mainland wushu stylist, took over the role. The next two films are generally well-liked by fans of the genre (especially the fifth one), although the box office receipts showed that the general Hong Kong populace didn't care for the new guy. In 1997, two years after the last OUATIC movie had come out, the sixth movie, *Once Upon a Time in China and America* (OUATICA) came out.

Jet Li returned to reprise his role as Wong Fei-Hung, the role that lifted him into stardom. Tsui Hark, Hong Kong's once visionary director who directed the first three installments, came on a board as producer. Directorial duties were given to Sammo Hung. I believe this was to be Sammo's triumphant return to the Jade Screen, after directing and starring in a lot of box-office failures during the early 1990s. It's a shame that his career took a downward turn after he stopped making movies with Jackie Chan, since he's an excellent choreographer and actor.

Unfortunately, while this movie did pretty good in the HK box office, the general consensus on this movie is that it's a weak, if not the weakest, entry in the series.

In the 1880s/1890s, Wong Fei-Hung (Jet Li), Aunt Yee (Rosamund Kwan), and Clubfoot/Ghost Foot Seven (Xiong Xin Xi) have come to the United States to visit the American branch of Wong's clinic, Po Chi Lam. The movie opens on the carriage ride from San Francisco, where we find Aunt Yee trying to teach English to the other two. They come across Billy, a gunfighter who's alone in the wilderness and dying of thirst. They save him and allow him to accompany them on their journey.

At a routine dinner stop, the carriage passengers are attacked by a by a tribe of hostile Indians. Luckily, the indians didn't count on raiding a party in which one of the members is a Chinese martial arts master, and soon Wong and Seven are dishing out kung fu goodness to those pesky Indians. Unfortunately, during the fracas, our three heroes get trapped in a carriage which goes into a river and our heroes get separated.

Seven and Aunt Yee end up in Fort Stockton (awww yeah!!! Stockton baby!!) where Buck-Tooth Sol takes cares of them. When they come to, they begin to look for Wong, but to no avail. At one point, they start putting up posters all over the place, only to incur the ire of the racist sheriff's deputies and regulars at the local bar. At one point, Aunt Yee goes into the bar asking if anyone has seen Wong, only to be harassed by the racist/sexist men. Luckily, Billy, who's become a sheriff's deputy, intervenes and even stages America's first "pit fight" when he bets everyone that they couldn't take Seven in hand-to-hand combat. hehehe

While all this is going on, Wong has turned up at a village of benevolent Indians. Unfortunately, Wong has bumped his head and now can't remember who he is. At first everyone is suspicious of him. Then he defends the village from the arrogant leader of the malevolent Indian tribe and wins everyone's respect, including the chief's daughter.

Wong is eventually reunited with his friends and the Chinese community back in town. After a really cool fight in which Seven impersonates Wong Fei-Hung's past arch-enemies, Wong gets his memory back and starts his usual speech-giving to the Chinese community there.

The real conflict begins when the town mayor goes bankrupt. Heavily in debt and without the money to pay the Chinese miners, he decides to make a pact with the team of bandits and have them rob the bank. What the bandits don't know is that the mayor is using their robbery as a diversion to still the \$400,000 in the bank vault. The mayor then has the foreman of the Chinese miners plant a money bag in Po Chi Lam in order to frame the Chinese. Everyone is arrested and seven of them, including Wong, Seven, and Billy, are sentenced to be hanged.

The plot of this movie is that of a typical Western movie. All the normal elements are there: corrupt officials, evil Indians, bandits, barfights, etc. Like his classic *Eastern Condors*, Sammo Hung takes a genre that Hong Kong filmmakers aren't really familiar with and spices up all the clichés with his superior action direction. Whereas *Eastern Condors* was a collection of war movie clichés, *OUATICA* is a collection of western clichés. It doesn't always work, but the inclusion of wire-fu in a western setting and a kung fu fighting bandit(!) help liven things up*.

As I mentioned earlier, the first three *OUATIC* films were fictional stories rooted in history. Among the historical elements tackled were the exploitation of Chinese laborers in the USA, Dr. Sun Yat-Sen and the Nationalists, and the Russo-Japanese War. The fourth movie was a fun film, although the plot was derivative of the second and third entries. The fifth one dealt with pirates. This one kind of finds some weird middle ground between the first three and the other

two. The plot itself is pretty cliché, but there the movie does make reference to the mistreatment of the Chinese by Americans and to their labors as coolies and mineworkers. However, instead of getting melodramatic about it, the movie goes into self-parody and has Wong Fei-Hung giving speeches that everyone falls asleep to.

I think this is one of those movies whose depiction of white people is a retaliation for the all of what Americans used to do to Chinese in their movies. All those years of putting make-up on white people, giving them fake buck teeth, and having them talk in proverbs has finally caught up to us. If you notice, there are only 2, maybe 3, sympathetic caucasians in the entire film. There's Billy, who's a gunfighter with a heart of gold. Heck, he even takes martial arts lessons from Seven during the movie. There's one of the bar girls that's pretty nice to Sol and the others. The Sheriff is sympathetic times; he does what can in spite of working for a corrupt, racist mayor. But everyone else are jerks and crooks, even the law.

I'm not sure, but I wonder if Jet Li did the dubbing for the Mandarin track. It sounds like him. If it isn't then they found a good person to do it (kinda like the guy who did Jackie Chan's dubbing in *Crime Story* and sounded almost just like him). All the Chinese actors do a good job. The Caucasian actors do well enough; they're certainly better than the actors from *The Master* and a lot of the 1990s Godzilla movies. The weak links are the Indians, who really aren't good actors...at all. Too bad Tsui and Sammo couldn't get those wise-cracking Indians from *Shanghai Noon*, that would've been cool.

While plot and characters are all well and good, this is a Jet Li movie. We watch these movies in order to see Jet Li kung fu people into oblivion. Do we get that? Oh heck yeah! Sammo Hung's fight direction is slick, fast, and, while wire-enhanced, is a great showcase for everyone's talents (even Aunt Yee and Billy get up in on the fighting). A lot of people complain about the camerawork, and while it does move fast, the fights still look nothing short of awesome to me. If I had a complaint about the fights, it's that there wasn't enough of them. But then, I usually always feel this way after watching a Sammo Hung movie. Sammo Hung's movies generally tend to consist of a few short bouts leading up to the climax, and this one follows trend.

One thing I must point out is Xiong Xin-Xin's performance. Most fans of the genre think that he's the best part about the OUATIC series (at least 4 and 5). He is great, but Yuen Bun (the action director for the fourth and fifth entries) used a lot of wires for his fights. This time, Sammo uses few wires with him and he kicks like a son of a... I don't think I've ever seen him fight better than in this movie.

Jet Li looks awesome. I'm willing to contend that this is his best performance since *Fist of Legend*. While he's had a lot of great moments and specific fights, he's just mesmerizing here. Sure, Sammo uses some wires, but I think it looks smooth and natural. It never seems like his abilities are being replaced by the wires, just slightly enhanced. He also does a lot of great kicks (w/o wires) and well...I get excited just talking about it.

One of the calling cards of Chinese cinema is the use of objects and environment in the fights. Sammo furnishes us with plenty of those. Tomahawks, spears, poles, wet cloths, carriages, horses, tables, etc. are used in some of the pre-climax fights. The finale, when Jet Li takes on the kung fu bandit, Sammo Hung spruces up the fight with money bags, spurs, hats, beer bottles, chairs, tables, troughs, and even a windmill for good measure.

So where does this movie fall in with the rest of the series? Storywise, you can probably rank it between the previous Jet Li entries and the other two. The fifth one got bogged down by too

much silly slapstick going on with the characters. Luckily, this one ditched Max Mox, whose portrayal of Leung Foon had become grating (I wished Yuen Biao had kept that role throughout the series).

The first one had some great fighting (courtesy of two of the Yuen brothers and Lau Kar-Wing), albeit a little rough around the edges. The second one, which was choreographed by the legendary Yuen Woo-Ping, was better in some regards. OUATIC III had a few good object fights, but the movie was missing the climatic one-on-one (What's up with that?). The fourth film had its moments, but it used a lot of wires and for the great cast it had (Zhao Wen-Zhuo, Xiong Xin-Xin, Billy Chow, Chin Kar-Lok, etc), it didn't seem like a tour-de-force for anyone. And the fifth one is just overrated as far as I'm concerned. I don't know, I can't help but feel OUATICA was simply a better showcase for Jet Li and his costars.

So all in all, this is a very entertaining movie. The fights are as good as you'd expect from Sammo Hung and Jet Li does an excellent job this time around. Had the story had just a little more self-parody to it, they could've just as well renamed the movie *Last Hero in China and America*. Or more appropriately, *Last Hero in America* since none of the movie does take place in China. (by Blake Matthews)

One-Armed Hero (Hong Kong, 1994: Cheng Siu-Keung) - In the conclusion to this epic, three-part martial arts saga, 'Iron Bridge' Sam (Do Siu-chun) becomes the new head of the Navy and takes on Japanese pirates and corrupt officials in defense of the people and pays a high price.

One Arm Hero is the final chapter in an epic martial arts movie trilogy that includes *White Lotus Cult* and *Sam the Iron Bridge*. Looking similar to the *Once Upon a Time in China* series in story, production, and choreography, the series has generally gone unnoticed for lacking big name stars. Yet it's comparable in production values, quality action direction by Philip Kwok, and good cast performances. Unfortunately, *One Arm Hero* continues the series' decline that began with the previous film. The first half features limited action, there are too many blatant similarities to *OUATIC*, and it's just a depressing end to the series.

The principle cast is back in their respective roles. Leung Kwan-sam (Do Siu-chun) has previously gone from lowly rickshaw puller to winning the court's coveted title of Supreme Master of Martial Arts. He is also awarded the position of Customs Service Officer and is now head of the Navy. With this good fortune, he marries his love Butterfly (Yip Chuen-chan). But this puts him at odds with his fellow corrupt officers, one of whom tries to offer his daughter (Fennie Yuen) to Sam as a bribe to ignore their skimming of funds and failure to address the problem of Japanese pirates. Against the wishes of Hung (Lily Li), his martial arts master who is a Ming loyalist, Sam accepts the Manchu position and immediately sets out to defeat the pirates by raising funds to buy rifles while going against his superior. Sam and his loyal navy troops defeat the pirates in an ambush, but Sam is arrested for insubordination. He becomes a fugitive after escaping a plot to kill him before he's tried and loses an arm and those closest to him. He eventually leads a last-ditch effort to assassinate the official responsible for his troubles.

This trilogy can be thought of as a big-budget version of one of China's many martial arts TV series. Unlike your typical 90-minute martial arts feature, these series have huge story arcs where a large cast of characters go through many dramatic changes. Like American soap operas, they are generally targeted towards female viewers and include a lot of melodrama. As the final chapter, *One Arm Hero* brings the story to a rather disappointing conclusion. The first

half of the film meanders with little driving force or action to sustain interest. It's basically all a setup for the fall of Sam as the hero.

The one action climax midway through occurs when Sam takes on the pirates. It features a large cast of extras, but with the introduction of guns for our heroes, don't expect much in the way of kung fu action. The action doesn't get good until Sam is taken prisoner and is waylaid by assassins while being transported to Peking by train. Philip Kwok's choreography pretty much matches the action in the *OUATIC* series, although it's not quite as inventive and it's obvious he had less time to work on it. The best combat can be seen in the last 20 minutes and nicely features former Shaw Brothers starlet Lily Li. She performs more kung fu in this film and the rest of the series than in most of her martial arts films two decades prior. Do Siu-chun is no Jet Li or Wu Jing, but performs well enough. Chiu Cheung-gwan plays the lead villain, but he's virtually unknown in the West apart from also being in *White Lotus Cult* and Sammo Hung's *Blade of Fury*. He plays his role well, but it's not a very memorable one.

One Arm Hero should not be mistaken as a *One Arm Swordsman* remake like Tsui Hark's *Blade*. The missing limb is just one of many genre elements the film borrows to fill out an unremarkable, wire fu-infested martial arts film. Although there is a recap of past events, viewers should watch the two previous films in the series first. Besides, the first (*White Lotus Cult*) is the best of the three. As a whole, the series is a less-enjoyable knockoff of the *OUATIC* series, but it is good enough that it should satisfy fans of '90s wire-fu movies. (by Mark Pollard of Kung Fu Cinema)

Operation Scorpion (Hong Kong, 1992: David Lai) – aka *The Scorpion King* - While it performed quite poorly at the box office in Hong Kong, with a run that only lasted a week, *Scorpion King* has deservedly become a cult classic. The reputation of this movie has been mainly due to the fantastic kicking ability of the main villain (Kim Won Jin) but there are so many elements in the mix that make it a classic.

The film centres around comic book obsessed Fai Yuk Su (Chin Kar Lok) who gets into trouble when he rescues a servant girl from prostitution. With the prostitution racket being run by the triad, with the aid of a corrupt local police chief, nowhere is safe and Fai, with his father and the girl, finds refuge at a noodle restaurant owned by seemingly mild-mannered chef Lau Kar Leung. It isn't long before gangsters, led by scorpion kung fu specialist Won Jin, come looking for the girl at the restaurant and events escalate towards the superb climax.

The list of names attached to the action direction is enough to raise high expectations in any kung fu movie fan's mind (and those expectations are met by the way). Yuen Tak is well known for his fine contributions to the genre having worked on such classics as *The Iceman Cometh* and *Saviour of the Soul* and is the credited action director here. In consultative roles were Yuen Kwai and the legendary Lau Kar Leung; the latter's involvement meant the authentic representation of Hung Gar kung fu on the screen with special reference to the 'Shadowless Kick' made famous in later years by Jet Li in the *OUATIC* series. Rather than the superhuman wire enhanced style given to the technique in those movies Lau Kar Leung performs it as a kick to the lower abdomen (which apparently it was). Despite his advancing years Lau Kar Leung can still move with great speed and puts in a superb performance including a short weapons display with a three sectioned staff.

Also making a major contribution to the shaping of the action scenes was Korean super kicker (and I do mean super) Won Jin who had so impressed director David Lai with his invented scorpion style kicking that this role was created especially for him. Well it could be argued that

the whole film was created for him as without his involvement there would have been no scorpion king. This was Won Jin's (billed as Yuen Jung) first role in Hong Kong and his relatively short and low key filmography has meant that he is still not that widely known. His performance here though is unlikely to be forgotten by anybody who sees it and hopefully this new release of the film will increase his profile and even perhaps give him the opportunity to make the sequel that he has always hoped for. Won Jin's performance is simply stunning and although there appear to be some occasions where wires have been used there are plenty of sequences where he is performing unaided. His kicking ability is quite unlike anything I've seen before or since.

With attention grabbing performances from Lau Kar Leung and Won Jin it would be easy to overlook everyone else, but Chin Kar Lok and Frankie Chan also bring much to this film. Chin Kar Lok's role is very much of the young understudy who learns kung fu from the master, Lau Kar Leung, in order to win the day. It's a role that is probably more biased towards acting, at which he is perfectly competent, than action but Kar Lok does get some opportunity to show his ample ability at the latter in the final reel. It's a shame that Chin Kar Lok never became the action star he deserved because he certainly had the physical ability. Frankie Chan appears in one of the film's most interesting fight scenes where his solid style of fighting is pitched against the more graceful movements of Won Jin.

While it is the action that will grab your attention, it wouldn't have been the same without the excellent cinematography and editing. The film features high production values and is extremely well made. The lighting and use of primary colours gives the film the comic book feel to which it refers at a number of points and the action is built around an engaging plot framework with a good level of detail paid to the development of the characters. (by John Richards of Wasted Life)

Painted Skin (Hong Kong, 1992: King Hu) - In this beautifully textured ghost story directed by King Hu the term "painted skin" refers to the human form that ghosts take on occasion to disguise themselves, but it could almost refer to the nearly paint like quality of this film. The beautiful images and exquisite detail of ancient China almost take on a fine brush feel to it. It may be too slow for many, but the mood, cinematography and soundtrack struck a chord with me.

From the opening credits, the paint like texture of this film is created as the camera traverses through landscapes into a room full of men playing ancient Chinese instruments late into the night. Master Wong (Adam Cheng) takes his leave to go home and on his way he sees a woman approaching him down this long shadowy alleyway. It is Joey Wong in a white shrouded outfit and she tells him that she needs a place to sleep that night as she has run away from her husband. Not being crazy, he gladly gives his assent and takes her home where he asks his wife if he can take her as his concubine. The wife wants to get a look at this woman and so she pokes a hole through the paper wall and much to her horror sees Joey take off her human face.

Joey tries to explain that she is "between Ying & Yang" – a wandering ghost unable to go to either heaven or hell and she has escaped from the evil Ghost King. She enlists the help of two Taoist priests in an attempt to kill the Ghost King so that she can be reincarnated, but their powers are not strong enough and so they journey to find a powerful priest to help them. They find him in the form of Sammo Hung. Don't expect much in terms of martial arts; it's primarily magic that is used but much of it is done very well. And Joey as usual makes a very lovely ethereal ghost.

This is King Hu's final film and it is considered by most to be one of his weakest films - slow and very mannered. After seeing some of his earlier films it seems evident that he had not changed his style with the times. Time had passed him by for the 90's audience. Tsui Hark had reinvented this type of film (though Tsui was very influenced by Hu) with his surreal images and kinetic action but Hu was doing it as he always did. But I loved the attention to detail and the slow-paced mood of the film. (by Brian of View from the Brooklyn Bridge)

Picture of a Nymph (Hong Kong, 1988: Wu Ma) - In the aftermath of the very successful *Chinese Ghost Story*, a plethora of similarly styled supernatural films were made – some quite good, some quite sexual and others that were neither. This Sammo Hung produced film follows the formula of a *Chinese Ghost Story* as closely as it possibly can even to the point of having Joey Wong once again play a mournful tragic ghost figure and Wu Ma (who also directs) once again as the surly ghost fighter. Though it isn't nearly as poetic, romantic and sumptuous as *Chinese Ghost Story*, this film is overall quite entertaining with a number of excellent fantasy/special effect scenes. It has also added – much to its benefit - a new character, the son of Wu Ma – played by Yuen Biao.

Beginning in myth like fashion, Lam Wai puts his son into a basket and lets it float down stream where a singing and semi-naked Wu Ma finds it and adopts the boy as his own. The boy grows up to be Yuen Biao and though he is following in the footsteps of his father as a hunter of ghosts, he plays it in charming Biao fashion - quite shy and playful. In an early scene, he tracks a demon, Yuen Wah, into the house of a poor young scholar – Lawrence Ng – and a battle ensues pitting the acrobatic skills of Yuen Biao against the deadly entrapping whiskers of Yuen Wah.

During the fight, Ng's house burns down and so Yuen offers him shelter in the home where his father and he live. Ng soon comes across the ethereal and painfully gorgeous Joey Wong. Joey is a ghost of course – and truly doesn't have to do much in the film but flutter her eyebrows over those sad brown watery eyes and look tragic and vulnerable – but that is enough. On her way to her wedding the Ghost King attacked her entourage and Joey jumped to her death rather than become the slave to the Ghost King. Now Joey's wandering spirit resides on the earth – unable to reincarnate and still being sought after by the Ghost King.

The Ghost King is in fact a female – performed juicily by Elizabeth Lee in a sensually evil manner – and she is in the habit of picking off brides to be and making them her slaves – and though never spelled out, it gives off hints of ghostly lesbian activities.

Love is a funny thing and Ng willingly enters into hell to fight for Joey's soul with Yuen and Wu Ma not far behind him. Of course as Yuen thoughtfully tells him – even if you should get her out, she is still a ghost and you are still a human. A mere trifle to Ng. With a face like Joey's, he will gladly take the downside – and who wouldn't? Yuen on the other hand is in love with a village girl (May Lo) who already has been captured by the Ghost King.

Ng's portrayal of the scholar was the weakest point of the film for me. Perhaps, I always think of him in terms of his role in *Sex and Zen*, but he always comes off as callow and effete and not at all the material of a romantic lead. So, I found it difficult to be swept up in the drama and romance of this film and didn't honestly care that much about the outcome. At the same time, this is a beautifully rendered film with a nice eye for detail, great eerie atmospherics and some memorable images. For Yuen Biao fans, he is very personable in this film and performs some nice acrobatics – but as one might expect in a ghost film like this, there is no real opportunity

for martial arts type action. (by Brian of View from the Brooklyn Bridge)

Rendezvous of Japanese Kanto (Taiwan, 1993: Law Kei) - aka *The Sun Society*; *The Gambler* - I bought this movie on a whim recently, and it turned out to be one of those hidden gems that become all too difficult to stumble across once you've been into the genre for several years.

The movie has a diverse and interesting set of talent working both behind and in-front of the camera. Directed by Law Kei, who was responsible for the bizarre Bruceploitation flicks *The Dragon Lives Again* and *Bruce Lee The Invincible*, and choreographed by Ricky Cheng (who also has a cameo) from Chang Cheh's Baby Venoms crew, it's very much a case of the old guard staking their claim in what was arguably the new-wave era of wire-fu.

In front of the camera we have Girls with Guns favorite Sibelle Hu, who true to form has some great scenes rampaging around with a machine gun. However what's most interesting is the presence of many Koreans in the cast, including the main character, played by the imposing Jang Seung-Hwa. Kwon Sung-young, Jang Seo-hee, and Song Keum-sik also feature, and indeed the whole production feels like a 90's Korean action movie.

For those unfamiliar with Korea's 90's action output, basically think of how good their gangster moves are now, then imagine them slightly rougher around the edges, but with the likes of Hwang Jang Lee (*Sandglass*), Casanova Wong (*Bloody Mafia*), and Dragon Lee (*Emperor of the Underworld*) dishing out their kicks in a modern day setting while decked out in suits. *Shiri* may have put Korean cinema on the map, but it also unfortunately seemed to put an end to these flicks, many of which still don't have a DVD release even in Korea.

So *Rendezvous of Japanese Kanto* does exactly what you'd expect a Korean action movie to do - provide fights which are boot work heavy, and plenty of them. Seung-hwa is built like a brick wall and looks to be over 6 foot tall, which combined with his ability to throw some mean kicks, make him a real authority whenever he's onscreen. The movie ends with a fantastic balls to the wall 15 minute finale, which plays out something like *City of Violence* meets *A Better Tomorrow II*, as kung-fu, guns, daggers, and swords are all thrown into the mix against a small army of Japanese attackers.

If you're looking for a boot work fix, this one is well worth picking up. (by Paul Bramhall)

Revanchist (Taiwan, 1994: Chong Yan-Gin) - Cho Fong (LS-M) and Nieh Fai (CJ-L) go to Shanghai as teenage boys and end up joining a gang. Fai kills a man, and Fong takes the rap. Determined to raise the money to free his childhood friend, Fai infiltrates a rival gang known to be collaborating with the Japanese. Flora (NS-S), Fong's sweetheart, arrives to learn that he is in prison and that her long lost (deadbeat) dad is the head of the traitorous gang. Her father is soon blackmailed by Dick (ZF-Y), his 2nd in command. He cedes his position to Dick, even promising to marry Flora to him. But Fong is out now, and he has a wedding to stop.

Fight #1 --- Gang ritual - This is just bizarre. In order to be selected for a special mission, gang members (of which Fai is one) scramble up a scaffold to bring down a throne/sedan chair. This is full of wire-work and falls, but it's kind of cool. Fai wins. While riding in the sedan chair on the shoulders of his fellows, a giant torpedo shoot out from under the chair of the chief monk or gang leader (I can't remember). Fai destroys it with 1 kick. He is then presented with a tray that holds a long needle, a small gong, and a drumstick. He jabs the needle completely through

one hand, hangs the gong from it, and bangs it as he is paraded about. (I am not making this up. Who wants to win that prize?)

Fight #2 --- Dick vs Fai - This is a weird fight. It's very wuxia-like. There's tons of wire-work and unrealistic moves. The only good thing about it is the villain's finishing move. It's a kick to the groin, and a shot of eggs breaking is interspersed, just so you don't fail to realize what's happening. Then you see Fai dead on the ground.

Fight #3 --- Fong vs Dick - Okay...this is either the most epic end fight ever or laughably the campiest. Ever seen a wuxia style gunfight? Well, here you go. (Take that, John Woo.) There's tons of bloodshed and high impact falls as these 2 guys scrap and fly around. Reloading is a leisurely option. Emptying gun clips is a necessity. At times, they knock one another 50 feet with a single kick. Wait! There're no more bullets. Not to worry. Fortunately, there're a couple of samurai swords on hand. Plenty of posturing, but no real swordplay, just a lot of hack and slash. It doesn't matter. These guys sustain as many wounds as James did as Sonny in *The Godfather*...and live. And just when you think it's over...whew! It is.

This movie was sent to me courtesy of One Armed Boxer. (And I'm still not sure whether to thank him or not.)

It's an odd mix. I mean, the story is relatively good, even though it's fairly typical. The casting and acting are good, too, as are the characters. The action is strange. I would have thought this had some actual kung fu or basher style action in it, and it did...for about 30 seconds, and that's spaced out through the film. I'd have to say that about 99% of the action is wire-work. Even in the gunfight scenes. It's just crazy. And yet it's humorous, brutal, and unbelievable, all at the same time. And disappointing.

What, or rather who, was not disappointing was Zhang Feng-Yi, who played the villainous Dick. And yes, he was. (Wait...what?)

This guy is a complete psychopath. He's fearless. He's coldhearted. He's a dirty fighter. He brown-noses who he needs to. He's a master manipulator. He's an amoral rapist who asks his victims if they enjoyed him. He's an egotistical misogynist whose go-to technique for dealing with women, who stand up to him, is to slap them in the face. He's a deadeye shot in throughout the movie until the end, when he becomes a worse shot than a Star Wars storm trooper. And he's fascinating to watch.

I don't know if this movie is easy to find. I don't know if you'd want to. I don't know if I'll ever watch it again...maybe the end fight because it's nuts. I just don't know. But I do know that it's your call. (by Scott Blasingame)

Revenge of Angel, The (Hong Kong, 1990: Richard Yeung) - Oooo, another film revolving around the opera.

The Raising Of The Curtains:

Moon Lee is the main actress for an opera troupe. However, she gets in the bad books of triad leader Chung Faat who disrupts the proceedings midway through a show. During the fight a fire breaks out, engulfing the entire theatre. Moon Lee saves her friend Wu Ma from being burnt to a crisp but unintentionally sacrifices herself.

Fast-forward twenty or so years, and the opera troupe arrives in town. Wu Ma is now a percussionist, while his cousin Lau Chi Wai is a new opera recruit. While off wandering by the river one night he spots Moon Lee. They become friends and after hearing her sorry tale vows to avenge her.

The Plum Blossom Dance:

Let us discuss the positives first. I liked how life backstage is shown-the superstition, rituals and the strong belief in the supernatural, which was why Lau Chi Wai wasn't too afraid when he saw Moon Lee as a ghost. Spirits exist, and it's no biggie. Also, the acting on the whole is solid-besides, Chung Faat and Wu Ma can always be depended on to give decent performances. There were quite a few action sequences here, and they were done quite well. I especially liked Moon Lee's battle with the demonic spirits on the ship.

The ship is positive no. 2. Now that was a nice creative touch-have Moon Lee's spirit on a model ship, complete with paper servants, sailing to eternity, but have the servants attack her. I really enjoyed that, it was probably the most interesting part of the film for me.

Now, to the negatives. Negative no 1. THE SOUNDTRACK. My GOD (or Buddha), were they THAT budgetted they could ONLY USE ONE TRACK for dramatic and emotional moments?! Did it have to SOUND SO DAMN CHEESY?! The first time I heard it, I could tolerate it. After five times, I could not. I simply could not.

Negative no 2. The film is basically this. Take a large slice of 'A Chinese Ghost Story' and add Chinese opera. Stir well and add some 'Close Encounters Of The Spooky Kind' for topping. Serve with some martial arts action on the side. It's an interesting mix, but not done terribly well. The taoist sequences towards the end are reasonable, but they lifted too blatantly from ACGS. If you're going to copy a formula, at least don't make it too obvious. Here they did.

Negative no 3. Not only did they not do the mixture well, this film on the whole wasn't interesting. The pacing was a little too slow. Also, films usually crank up in anticipation for the end. This film does the opposite-it runs out of steam. (by ButterflyMurders of HKMDB)

Royal Tramp (Hong Kong, 1992: Wong Jing) - This is an interesting film from Stephen Chow though I am not really sure how to describe it. It is a fun film, but not really a funny film. There are few big laughs anywhere and yet it was consistently enjoyable and visually delightful. Chow is attempting to parody the kung-fu flying films that were so popular at the time – Swordsman II, Dragon Inn etc. – but he makes such an effort to have everything so authentic that I think he got immersed in the visually spectacular scenes and sort of forgot about the humor. Not to say there isn't any – there is, but not nearly so much as most of his other comedies.

The story takes place at the beginning of the Manchu Dynasty and Chow is literally a teller of tall tales in a brothel (he relates his stories from the top of many chairs stacked on one another). His life soon turns into an Imperial version of "How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying". Let's see if I can get this straight.

While he is in the brothel, the Manchu troops come looking for a Ming rebel, Damian Lau, and Chow helps him escape and thus becomes a member of their secret Heaven and Earth society. He "volunteers" for an assignment to infiltrate the Forbidden City and steal a book that will direct them to a lost Ming treasure. Chow stands on what he thinks is the application line for

household servants, but is in fact the line for new eunuchs. He is saved right before his loss of manhood by the head eunuch, Ng Man-Tat, who needs him for a secret mission – to spy on the Dowager Empress, Cheung Man.

Chow soon bumps into Chingmy Yau, the Emperor's sister, who he thinks is a eunuch – as Chingmy thinks he is – but they soon find out quite differently much to their delight. Through various accidents as much as anything, Chow is soon being hailed as having great bravery (of which he has little) and great kung-fu (of which he has none) and soon finds himself a senior advisor to the Emperor and begins to forget about his initial assignment. Wouldn't you if you had Chingmy throwing herself at you?

Throughout all of this there are some wonderful kung-fu fighting and flying scenes from Tsui Kam-Kong as the evil general, Ng Man-Tat with his deadly kung-fu stance and Cheung Man who is actually a member of the secret Dragon sect. On top of this are the two Ming female twins who are sent to both protect and keep an eye on Chow.

It is all quite fun and very sumptuous – lovely sets and costumes – but again not really all that humorous. Wong Jing directs this film in his usual fast-moving manner with many lovely actresses along the way. (by Brian of View from the Brooklyn Bridge)

Royal Tramp II (Hong Kong, 1992: Wong Jing) - *Royal Tramp II* is very similar to the first one as Stephen Chow continues his parody of kung-fu flying films. There is a wonderful jab at *The East is Red*. Again, though the story itself is so involving and everything so lavish that the comedy often gets lost. Still I found this a lot of fun and it has a terrific last thirty minutes.

It begins right where the first *Royal Tramp* left off. Cheung Man returns back to the Dragon sect where the head has her turn back into her real form. This turns out not to be such a bad thing as she comes out of the holy water, swirls around and there before us stands the greatest HK female icon of all – Brigitte Lin. Who better to parody these types of films. She swears revenge on Stephen Chow, but the sect head warns her to be careful and not lose her virginity or she will transfer 80% of her power to the man.

Chow is in the middle of court intrigue once again. How successful is he? Well let's say that by the end he has Chingmy Yau, Brigitte Lin, Michelle Reis and the twins after him. Not too bad. There is the plethora of complications – the Emperor has ordered Chingmy to marry the son of his main rival, but she is pregnant by our hero Chow. At the same time the Dragon sect and Brigitte are trying to overthrow the Manchus and kill Chow as well. Michelle Reis is a Ming rebel and is also trying to kill Chow. The twins show up from time to time and Chow's best friend Natalis Chan is also only too willing to betray him.

All this is a mere bag of shells to Chow who once again through luck manages to wiggle and talk his way out of death and danger. At some point Brigitte is poisoned and the only cure is to make love to a man. Who just happens to be within hailing distance? Chow of course – some guys have all the luck. Brigitte's seduction of Chow is one of the film's wonderful highlights as she magically creates a cocoon like structure out of silk in which to bed him down.

Lots of spectacle and some comedy. There actually feels like more action and flying in this film than in many legitimate kung-fu flying films and it is often better done. (by Brian of View from the Brooklyn Bridge)

Sam the Iron Bridge (Hong Kong, 1993: Cheng Siu-Keung) - Rickshaw puller and resident Champion of Martial Arts, "Iron Bridge" Sam (Do Siu Chun) protects a government official sent by the Emperor to put a stop to the opium trade in a Chinese coastal city, while the local governor secretly plots to kill the official.

Sam the Iron Bridge is the second wire-fu film in the "Martial Arts Trilogy" beginning with *White Lotus Cult* and concluding with *One Arm Hero*. The principle cast remains intact, having defeated an evil cult and moved on to tackling opium smuggling. There are a number of "wired" fights that match the quality and style of the previous film, but uninspiring acting and a lethargic, derivative story makes this sequel less appealing.

The film starts off on the right foot with a fun teahouse brawl featuring Fennie Yuen as Keke, parading as a man. She pulls off a series of eye-catching moves with apparent ease. But then, the camera work sells the scene in a boldly kinetic fashion that could make just about any action novice look invincible. Fennie plays Keke, the daughter of Master Mu, who defies the emperor's latest decree by continuing to participate in the trading of opium. Opium, of course, was a highly addictive drug that plagued China in the 18th and 19th century. British traders bled the country of natural resources as demand for the drug grew.

In response, the emperor sends a "Secret Officer" named Lin Tse-hsu to enforce the country's ban on opium. He initially receives strong opposition from Admiral Kuan (Yue Hoi) who has been duped by Master Mu into believing that the drug, also called "Longlife Plaster" in what appears to be a slightly mangled translation, is beneficial. Lin proves the opposite with a company of soldiers as guinea pigs and Kuan has a change of heart.

It's interesting to note at this point that no one in the film seems to care so much about what the emperor's wishes are, but rather what their conscience tells them. It's a moral issue and one that our hero Sam Liang (Do Siu Chun), nicknamed the "Iron Bridge" feels strongly about. Having earned the title of "Champion of Martial Arts" after winning a competition, Sam comes to the aid of Lin who is being attacked by Mu's men. Sam is secretly recruited as Lin's bodyguard so as not to openly oppose his master, a woman who despises the Qing government as played by former kung fu leading lady Lily Li. Her role is somewhat smaller in this film which is a shame since she is such a great actress.

As political intrigue heats up over the topic of opium, a love triangle is woven into the mix. After several combative encounters, Keke falls for Sam, but alas he is destined to marry his sweetheart Tieh (Yip Chuen Chan). In a rather ridiculous use of kung fu lore, Sam ends up on the receiving end of a poisonous palm blow that can only be cured by having intercourse with a virgin. Keke gladly seduces the semi-conscious Sam, but gives him up after he remains loyal to Tieh. All of this nonsense is wasted screen time for our stars. Do Siu Chun is devoid of personality and thoroughly unable to carry the leading role, except when he's fighting.

Despite great costumes and period sets, *Sam the Iron Bridge* looks and feels like the weaker rehash of *Once Upon a Time in China* and *Iron Monkey* that it is. With virtually no humor, dry performances from all, and too much gabbing between action scenes, it is difficult to maintain interest in the story. (Miserable subtitles on Tai Seng's edition doesn't help.) In contrast, the martial arts action is expertly choreographed and uniformly entertaining. Had so many other superior wire-fu films with bigger stars not been released before or about the same time, this film might have stood out more prominently. As it is, this is a mildly diverting effort suitable for those who cannot get enough queue-wagging, semi-flying, wonder powder action. (by Mark Pollard of Kung Fu Cinema)

Satyr Monks (Hong Kong, 1994: Pink Shek) – aka *Magic Legs* - “Satyr Monks” is a costumed, “historical” Cat. III production in which the flimsy plot and brief action sequences serve mainly to connect the extended and gratuitous sexual scenes. The plot is essentially summarized by one of Nadeki’s few lines, caustically addressed to the central male character: “You occupy a temple and rape women.” This corrupt monk is attempting to enhance his powers by experiencing sex with 108 women – essentially via abduction and assault. His assault on a troupe of female acrobats involves “Wienie,” the daughter of a certain “Master Tsu” whose “Double Kick” technique is then ranged against the evil monk’s “Steel Palm.”

Nadeki appears as the mysterious “Lady Hung” in a minor supporting role. Strikingly attired in flowing red silk, she first appears in a wirework scene in which she confronts the monk and his followers. At the film’s climax she engages him in 1:1 combat that is fortunately not compromised by wires. This fight is of interest for Nadeki’s brief sword work, and eventual killing of the villain by choking him with a leg lock. The symbolism of choking – particularly of a sexual assailant – should be noted. Although Nadeki may be glimpsed using a knife in “Mission of Condor,” her brief appearance in this film is her sole screen display of sword and grappling techniques. (by Brian of View from the Brooklyn Bridge)

This bizarre film does not know what it wants to be. Half of it is a “category 3” (graphic sex) peep show about monks kidnapping and performing sexual alchemy with virgins (these scenes go on and on and have little story value). The other part is a very straightforward old-fashioned kung fu story about students and an old master seeking revenge, and training to improve their kung fu. There is only a thin strand tying the sex portions and the kung fu. The star of the kung fu part is a guy who has starred in various 1990s martial arts films, including one in which he played Wong Fei Hung. Here, he is Bruce Lee-like in that he relies on simple punches like right crosses, and spin kicks. He and his (wu shu) female partner learn a secret kicking technique that looks similar to tan tui. (by Martial Artist’s Guide to Hong Kong Films)

Saviour of the Soul (Hong Kong, 1991: David Lai, Jeff Lau, Corey Yuen) - ometimes a little imagination and invention can do wonders with a relatively small budget. Hong Kong film-making has often been a perfect showcase for this ethos with many cult classics and subsequently influential films being evidence of the skill of the director rather than the size of the production values. *Saviour Of The Soul* is an excellent example of these cinematic virtues and has rightfully gained a huge following among filmgoers world-wide.

Andy Lau takes a lead role as a ‘City Warrior’ – a supremely gifted swordsman who defends futuristic Hong Kong from various villains. With him is a suave, gun-toting hero (Bee) and a dagger-wielding super-heroine, (Mui) who use their incredible skills to aid law enforcement. Spending considerable time together as a trio – with occasional interruption from Mui’s shrill twin sister – the two male heroes begin to fall in love with their fellow warrior. The past though catches up with Mui as a formidable fighter named Silver Fox (Kwok) comes looking to avenge his master at all costs. In a startling battle at the train station, Bee is killed defending Mui and Silver Fox escapes with a severe injury to his eye. Knowing that her presence means further trouble for Lau and Bee’s newly arrived young sister (Yip), Mui goes into hiding and attempts to protect those she loves from the wrath of Silver Fox. Having lost the woman he loves, Lau concentrates on his swordplay skills and looking after Yip who secretly has a crush on him; discreetly though he continues to look for her in every corner of the city and even disrupts a martial arts tournament to find her. When the young City Warrior finally finds his

long lost love, his actions bring into being a final showdown as Silver Fox returns to kill those he left behind.

With a startling visual style and innovative action aplenty, *Saviour Of The Soul* ranks among the very best of the Hong Kong fantasy genre. Each frame of this production is filled with sharp, eye-catching colours that give the whole film the unique texture of a larger-than-life comic book and makes sure that this is a cut above the average action film. It's refreshing to see stars such as Andy Lau, Aaron Kwok and Anita Mui combine efforts and also break out of their usual character roles; Lau in particular seems to relish the chance to appear in such an off-the-wall production and enjoy mixing comedy and fight action. Although the action is performed by a non-martial arts skilled cast, action-choreographer Yuen Tak makes sure that everyone involved is made to look as impressive as in any of their other films. The final battle between Andy Lau and Aaron Kwok stands as obvious proof of this. What has caught the eye of many newcomers to Hong Kong cinema – aside from the exciting fight action – is the well-designed special effects that give clear indication of what can be done on a smaller budget. Every dollar of the budget has been poured onto the screen and fully utilised.

For those who are not familiar with Hong Kong cinema's fondness for broad comedy alongside their action, certain elements of *Saviour Of The Soul* may seem jarring or inappropriate. Some moments start out firmly as action orientated ones and then suddenly turn into comedy, but this is not particularly unusual for a Hong Kong film and the comedy is quite effective. If you've yet to see this 90's cult classic film be sure to catch it at the next opportunity. Although it just misses out on full marks, it is still an undeniable must-see film for all action film fans. (by Andrew Saroch of Far East Films)

Saviour of the Soul 2 (Hong Kong, 1992: David Lai, Corey Yuen) - In a search for a treasure aiming for a reward from the devil, Andy met and found his long-time dream lover, Rosamund. However, in order to save Rosamund from the Devil, Andy was killed. Rosamund gives Andy her last sacred breath for his resurrection but Andy has chosen to die again for the retrieval of Rosamund's beauty. Andy and Rosamund could only become dream lovers.

The first *Saviour Of The Soul* is a film which I hold in very high regard. It is very much like a fantasy comic book on film, and it features some cool fight scenes, funny humour and a decent story. Liking a film that much makes you want to see its sequel to find out if it can be as good as the original. Unfortunately, in this instance, it is not the case, and from very early on in the film it is painfully clear that *Saviour Of The Soul II* has absolutely nothing to do with the first film at all, and is merely a sequel in name only.

I'll start things out by stating that *Saviour Of The Soul II* is a very strange film in almost every regard. The plot, when implemented onto film, is really quite bizarre. On paper it sounds like it should be an interesting fantasy story, but the directors have made it into a very strange ride indeed. The humour is also very strange. It varies its tone frequently and can go from normal slapstick to spoof, and all the way to downright ridiculous, surreal and weird. Basically, what I'm trying to say is do not go into *Saviour Of The Soul II* expecting a normal film, even by some Hong Kong standards.

What I can make out of the plot goes like this... Andy Lau is Ching Yan, a man that has dreamed of the same woman every night for 28 years. He sees her as being his dream girl. Living with his godson (who idolises him), and mad doctor friend (Corey Yuen) they end up setting out on a quest to track down the Virgin's Ice, in order to get a large financial reward. It is rumoured that the Virgin's Ice can give eternal life. Unbeknownst to Ching Yan, the woman that is the Virgin's

Ice is the woman in his dreams (Rosamund Kwan). Also wanting to get his hands on the Virgin's Ice is the King of Evil, and in an attack, Ching Yan is fatally wounded. The only way he can be brought back is from the breath of the Virgin's Ice woman, but if she gives him life, she will lose her life.

Ok, so I don't think it sounds as bizarre as I stated it actually is, you really need to see the film to appreciate how strange it becomes at times. A factor that probably heightens this is the fact that the tone of the film changes quite frequently. It starts off as an out and out comedy, with some really weird and wonderful gags, then it turns into more of an action film and lastly it becomes far more drama orientated, with little in the way of humour at all. This tone imbalance, while quite typical for a lot of Hong Kong films, due to its severity it detracts from the film.

The humour at the start of the film certainly takes a few minutes to get used to, as it really is beyond slapstick. It is fantasy humour, with no hints of reality involved. There is a magnifying glass that actually increases the size of things that it appears to magnify, invisible potions, and quite a few other visual gags. The magnifying one is used just a little too much and as such in the scenes it is used in, the humour value is somewhat decreased by the last use. One of the funnier moments is the spoof of Stephen Chow's spoof of the God of Gambler's entrance. Or at least I figure from what is said in the film, it is a spoof of Stephen Chow's spoof in *All For The Winner* as I have yet to see that film. Most of the humour certainly is strange, weird, bizarre, ridiculous, slapstick and almost any other word like that which you care to use, but after I got used to it I did find it quite funny. Unfortunately, some of the gags were lost on me due to the subtitles not subtitling text.

So, after the humour, *Saviour Of The Soul II* became more focussed on being an action film. The action is generally weapon based, with Andy Lau sporting a straight sword, much like in the original *Saviour Of The Soul*, maybe that was the link needed to call this part II?! Anyway, the action is quite entertaining to watch, but is very heavily fantasy orientated, using wires for practically every scene and move. The characters can't just jump ridiculously large and high distances, they can actually fly. So make sure you switch off all reality filters prior to watching this film (if you choose to watch it that is!). The choreography isn't over complex, and does feature a lot of spinning and the like to make it look more fancy and aesthetically appealing, which works for me! It won't make you go "wow!", but I think it is still entertaining enough.

For me the film's weakest area is the drama sections relating to the plot. As the film really is a bit of a jumbled mess as far as tone goes, emotion towards the characters is not built up that well through the story. So when things start getting sentimental and dramatic, I found that I wasn't really involved or caring. Following and understanding the plot is also a little difficult, so having to try to figure out what is going on is something else that detracts from anything positive about the drama.

The acting is a difficult one to comment on. I don't think anyone puts in that great a performance by any means, but the performances are definitely suited to the comedy moments. In such farcical comedy, sub-par acting can be excused and can possibly even fit well in those situations, but when the film turns serious the flaws in the acting become quite obvious. Like in the film *The Moon Warriors*, Andy Lau is not that convincing at all at acting a dying man. I leave it with just saying that there certainly won't have been any Oscar nods for anyone in this film.

While there are moments in the film that are memorable, one of them being the scenery in the snowy mountain shots, there are many other moments that are worth forgetting. The film feels like too much of a mess, and this undoubtedly harms the overall enjoyment factor.

I admit I was a little prejudice against this film at first because it uses the *Saviour Of The Soul* name, but clearly isn't a related sequel to this film at all. However, treating it fairly I do think that the film has some promising moments, but is so seriously let down by the huge tone imbalance and a rather jumbled and slightly confusing to follow plot. It could definitely have been better, and had it stayed as an outright comedy I do think this would have been a highly enjoyable film. As it is, though, I think it is one that can quite easily be overlooked. (by Dark Dragon Style)

Shaolin Avengers (Hong Kong, 1994: Lee Chiu) – aka Kung Fu Kid; Shaolin Heroes - Part of Tai Seng's "Shaolin Classic Series" back in the late 90s, this is obviously an attempt to cash in on the major success of Jet Li's *Fong Sai Yuk* movies from the year before. Poor Chin Kar-Lok. He was ready for the big time in the 90s after years of smaller roles and stuntwork. But here, like *Martial Arts Master Wong Fei Hung*, it's clear that the filmmakers were more intent on trying to make the guy the next Jet Li by having him ape Jet's approach to the characters in question, than by exploiting his own strengths. In this movie, Chinese folk hero Hung Shi-Kwan (the late Lam Ching-Ying) is on the run from the Manchus. His path crosses with that of Fong Sai-Yuk (Chin Kar-Lok) when he saves Fong from a powerful fighter trying to avenge the death of his son-in-law, Tiger Lee (apparently someone that Fong actually fought and killed). Tiger Lee's widow complains to the governor, whose right-hand man was a Shaolin traitor. That puts the Manchus on Hung's tail and, eventually, Fong's as well. Will anyone survive?

There's too much unfunny comedy here, and Chin Kar-Lok and Siqin Gaowa, who plays Fong's mother, don't have the same comedic chemistry that Jet Li and Josephine Siao did (although kudos to the filmmakers for portraying Fong's parents as having a sex life in their middle age). The action was choreographed by Hsiao Ho (*Mad Monkey Kung Fu*) and Benny Lai (the mute kickboxer from *Police Story 2*), which mixes some old school shapes action (courtesy of Lam Ching-Ying) with the then-vogue wire-assisted stunts. Chin Kar-Lok is very acrobatic, but his fast and agile kicks don't really come into play until the final ten minutes. The final fight has an unfortunate "Me Too" quality to it, cribbing bits from *Wing Chun* (slipping around on soy beans) and *QUATRIC 2* (the villain fighting with a piece of wet cloth). The movie needed more action and its own personality. (by Blake Matthews)

Slave Of The Sword (Taiwan, 1993: Kevin Chu Yen-Ping) - Chang Wu Nien (Pauline Chan - *Escape From Brothel*, *From Beijing With Love*) sees her father killed and when begging on the streets subsequently, she's taken into the stable of prostitutes run by Yeh Hon (Joyce Ngai - *Amazing Stories*). Plans by Yeh Hon for Wu Nien are something different though and out in the dark woods, fighting and eliminating of opponents in the Wuxia world is taking place with silent swordsman Yun (Jackson Lau) and Eunuch Li (Max Mok) playing roles. Two seemingly unrelated strands turning out to have much to do with each other as it turns out...

Chu Yen-Ping has more than one occasion let's say re-used aspects of other movies in his own such as the show stopping Asian-Spaghetti-Western-Chinese guys in Nazi uniforms-femme fatale extravaganza *Golden Queen's Commando* (1982) and the all star prison drama *Island Of Fire* (1990). Ok, he's flat out copied great scenes beat by beat from *Cool Hand Luke* and *My Name Is Nobody* but him in the middle of the new wave kung-fu and swordplay craze here features the re-use aspect in a proper way. Being the producer and part of the production

company of Michael Mak's wild *Wuxia Butterfly & Sword*, *Slave of The Sword* released a few months later sees Chu re-using sets and even footage (most notably Tony Leung Chiu-Wai's, or his stuntman's, flying arrow attack) from said flick for his own 18+ oriented high flying personal drama. Yep, it's not a slice of the swordsman universe that is particularly epic or colorful and in the end *Slave Of The Sword* has turned out to be a fair amount more than just a comparison piece of moods for Chu Yen-Ping's Wuxia movies at the time. *Butterfly & Sword* told it dramatically but with a lot more over the top action, *Flying Dagger* was wacky and insane (with Wong Jing and Chu on one production, you'd imagine it would be) and *Slave Of The Sword* takes a short running time (1*) and dives into deeply planted seeds of revenge and disgust. The effect is surprisingly enough there but those of us who watched the long version of *Island Of Fire* are NOT surprised it would be.

Narration tells us we're going to witness a typical story of thieves and whores. Add murderers and in some ways it's a spot on observation. That doesn't mean it's tried and tired material but Chu Yen-Ping is asking us to sit rather tight, pay attention and hopefully rewards will be given after the short running time. Not the best pace is employed and Chu seems to extend the epic beauty of certain moments for the sake of it but he does have a grip on the darker atmosphere of this particular slice of the Wuxia world.

Any light in character's lives is quickly shot down, in particular of course for Pauline Chan's Wu Nien (and she suffered disturbingly regularly in these movies, *Escape From Brothel* being one example). It's clearly a dog eat dog world and although Joyce Ngai's Yeh Hon seemingly brings in Wu Nien into a better living standard and even may have the agenda of wanting to toughen her up to survive in this world, you know good intentions aren't written on the wall. All captured on pretty stunning sets and via accomplished cinematography, Chu sure loves what he's getting out of the material visually and by the end he's been entitled to love his surroundings. It's deceptive beauty and outside of the prostitute mansion, the rain is hailing down with fighting usually ending up in bloody fashion with bodies being torn apart. The action aspect isn't very extensive in the vein of Ching Siu-Tung's work on *Butterfly & Sword* but the quick-cut, gory ends to certain wire assisted fights are an entertaining sight. As Wu Nien connects to Jackson Lau's Yun who's a killer for hire and even is the one bringing her into the arms or claws of Yeh Hon, we get evidence of Wu Nien and Yun connecting as characters stuck in meaningless cycles of violence and in her case, giving her hopefully strengthened soul and body to men.

It's rather unsaid much of this, a testament to the dramatic skills of Chu Yen-Ping but also, he doesn't go overboard. It's enough drama for barely 80 minutes of film and when concerning a small group of characters, you don't need that much running time to work with. Sex scenes are blessed with the keen eye visually and are an attractive part of the drama (even when it's portrayed as darkly disturbing). *Slave Of The Sword* seemingly wanted to make a few points only and not contend with the higher division and this suitable thinking gets Chu Yen-Ping strong points. The Wuxia world small in scale and low on tricky twists that are instead more human, that's a reason for fair success here that's hopefully a selling point for those who are looking for gorgeous flesh on display. Flesh is a key, even when the movie turns as deep as intended. (by So Good Reviews)

Storm Riders, The (Hong Kong, 1998: Andrew Lau) - It's no big secret these days that Hong Kong movies suck, that whatever energy once exemplified the city-state's cinematic industry through the 60s, 70s, and 80s is dead, or at least dormant. What we're left with in the wake of the Hong Kong new wave's passing is little more than a pathetic collection of softcore porn (better than Shannon Tweed stuff, but still...), worthless brain-dead action films, grating

romantic comedies that make you want to go out and kill kill kill, and general no-budget, no-talent crap so abysmal that it almost undoes all the great things that used to come out of Hong Kong.

You know you're in trouble when people are desperate enough to adopt Donnie Yen -- the Mario Van Peebles of the Hong Kong film industry -- as the most promising young talent. Look, Donnie Yen has "been showing a lot of potential to be good" for something like twenty years now. If he hasn't done anything yet, then maybe it's time to admit the guy is, in fact, a worthless hack.

Hong Kong is a polluted sea churning with slap-dash nonsense, undercranked and ridiculous looking wire-fu debacles, and films whose scripts seem to have been assembled at random by a small inbred family of chimps with wild Charles Manson hair. There was a time when Hong Kong filmmakers actually put some small degree of effort into the script, but round about the mid 1990s they realized they could squeeze out any incoherent piece of tripe and people would eat it up no matter how poorly made and vile it was. They were, of course, wrong, and the total disregard for quality that blossomed in the mid-90s helped destroy the once mighty Hong Kong film industry.

Even once-great directors like Tsui Hark seem incapable these days of making anything that might rank higher than, say, being stricken with a sudden and intense case of diarrhea when you are miles away from the nearest toilet. His latest big idea after cranking out some truly worthless Jean-Claude Van Damme films is to remake the John Woo classic *A Better Tomorrow*, only with an all-female main cast. This guy used to have great ideas, or at least managed to have two great ideas for every three bad ones (like that notion he had to make the musical live-action version of *Mai, the Psychic Girl* starring Winona Ryder. Probably just a rumor, but it still makes me laugh).

The entire situation is made all the more tragic by how great Hong Kong movies once were. Starting with the Shaw Brothers swordsman epics of the 1960s, continuing on through the golden age of kungfu films in the 1970s, the kungfu revolution of Jackie Chan and Sammo Hung in the 1980s, and the invention of the Hong Kong new wave by guys like Ringo Lam, Tsui Hark, and John Woo, for three decades Hong Kong film making was a dynasty.

Then, in the 1990s, round about the time American fans started greedily devouring anything at all from Hong Kong and celebrating it as high art despite the "make a quick buck" mentality that dominated the industry, something started to go terribly wrong. The films were becoming increasingly cheap and haphazard looking, as if the men and women behind them were so high on their own success that they felt they could shit out a film and people would love it. Scripts looked like they were thrown together by mental patients, and due to injury, retirement, or immigration to other countries, much of the old talent disappeared and was replaced by the new school who lacked any real skill in anything at all, be it acting, directing, or doing kungfu.

Criminal triads bled the industry dry, milking it for every last penny they could steal and then leaving a shriveled, dried-up corpse not unlike that space vampire woman in *Lifeforce*, only unlike Mathilda May, these gangsters were not stunningly beautiful and naked throughout the entire film. And given that most gangsters, despite the glamorous images of themselves they helped put on screen, are out-of-shape thugs with dripping, oily jeury curl haircuts, you probably wouldn't want them strutting about in the nude anyway.

Persistent injuries to big-name stars like Jackie Chan, Michelle Yeoh, and Jet Li meant they were relying increasingly on stunt doubles, camera tricks, and wires to do what they used to

do on their own. Old age, frustration, the lure of Hollywood, and the desire to get out from under the thumbs of the gangsters who controlled the industry lead many actors and directors to America, Japan, and The Philippines. Uncertainty over what would happen after the 1997 hand-over of the island to Communist China chased away a lot of other people, or at least started them thinking about things other than movies.

Lump on top of all this the truly monumental pirate VCD market in Asia. Movies started coming out on VCD before they were in theaters, and people were much happier picking up these ultra-cheap discs than going to the theater, especially since the movies were starting to suck. It's a catch-22 there, or a chicken and egg conundrum trying to figure out whether people bought VCDs because they didn't want to pay to see a shitty movie, or whether the movies started getting shitty because so much money was being lost to the pirate market. Either way, it's one of the few markets where video piracy actually did help destroy the industry, though frankly, it had become so big and bloated that it was bound to pop at some point.

As if all this wasn't enough, the Asian economic recession of the 1990s put the final nail in the coffin of Hong Kong's domestic product. Where Hong Kong was once fiercely loyal to its own industry, the flood has slowed to a trickle, and people turn out to see big budget American films while eschewing the local stuff. Which is odd, because as bad as Hong Kong cinema may be, it's no worse than, say *Battlefield Earth* or *Wild Wild West*. Hong Kong is an easy target because of the trendiness, albeit waning, of the films, but you can't really help but notice that we're in a global recession when it comes to quality movies, and Hong Kong films are no worse than the crap coming out of America and Japan these days. Weirdly enough, India seems to have picked up the ball in terms of making amazing, complex, and elegant action films, but a lack of distribution and translations keep Hindi films, however great and action-packed they may be, relatively inaccessible to the greater American cult film audience. And the musical numbers simply scare a lot of people away.

But it's not like Hong Kong didn't earn the break from making good films. They've given us thirty years of great material to work with. And as bad as things may be these days, we can enjoy the past while we search the drech for a glimmer of hope in the future.

And in this environment, when a glimmer does appear, however faint, it is blinding in its brilliance, simply because that which surrounds it so dim. The most promising film to come out of Hong Kong in the past several years is Andrew Lau's (Lau Wai-keung, not the famous bad actor and worse singer Andy Lau Tak-wah) special effects fantasy extravaganza *Storm Riders*. Ahh, you were wondering if I was ever going to get to the movie review, weren't you?

Touted by many as sort of a next generation *Zu*, this film actually holds up pretty well to the comparison by being a rather inventive, action-packed, highly stylized spectacle of no-holds-barred film making. What makes it different from most all other Hong Kong films these days is that it's actually fun, and they put a ton of time, money, and effort into it. In fact, it became the most expensive Hong Kong film ever made, a title previously held by films like Jackie Chan's globe-hopping adventure film *Armor of God II: Operation Condor*. As a quick aside, since *Armor of God II* was released in America as *Operation Condor* before the first film, when they finally released the first film, they called it *Operation Condor II: Armor of God*. Not quite as silly as the infamous mistitling of Bruce Lee films, but still amusing.

Back to *Storm Riders*, since that's the film I'm reviewing and I generally like to stay on topic. Fading teen heart-throb Aaron Kwok, who has not aged a day in fifteen years, stars with current teen heart-throb Ekin Cheng, who rose to fame with his role in those annoying *Young and Dangerous* films. Aaron's film career always seemed to show promise, as he is good

looking and physically talented. But every time it seemed to be getting on track, it would falter, probably because he's a pretty lame actor. Luckily that doesn't matter anymore, and what's important is that he has good hair and is willing to wear a cape. You know, I seem to recall an unusually high number of films in which Aaron dons a cape. Both he and Ekin Cheng have amazing hair talent that allows them to have the sort of hair usually only found on an anime cartoon character. As *Storm Riders* is an adaptation of a comic book, this ability to have flowing cartoon hair that is perpetually waving in the breeze is important, and let it never be said that the hairdos of Ekin and Aaron don't rise to the occasion.

Anyway, not to be undone in the wooden acting department, Ekin Cheng excels at bad acting and is every bit Aaron Kwok's equal in this department. Unlike a lot of Ekin bashers, and they are legion, I actually admit that there is quite a bit of talent somewhere inside Ekin that goes beyond his amazing hair. He has a glimmer of talent and charisma, and with the right director, he could probably become a decent actor. Unfortunately, I don't think anyone is interested in good acting anymore, and unless he develops a massive "I'm an artist" ego like Tom Cruise, it's unlikely Ekin will feel driven to hone his craft. But there's some hope. After all, Leslie Cheung was a pretty worthless actor at first, but over the years has become better and better.

None of this really matters, though, as both guys are here to play one-dimensional comic book characters, and they certainly have the talent to pull that off. They star as orphans named Wind and Cloud who are being raised by a bad-ass warlord who happens to be the guy who orphaned them in the first place by killing their respective parents. The warlord, who doesn't fuck around and simply names himself Conqueror, is played by none other than the mainstay of 1970s action and sci-fi programming in Japan, Sonny "The Streetfighter" Chiba, who seems to be turning into Toshiro Mifune in his old age. That's not bad. You can do a lot worse than start to look like Toshiro Mifune, one of the grand masters of bad-assness. For instance, you could start looking like Don Rickels or Phyllis Diller, or even worse, like a combination of Don Rickels and Phyllis Diller. Then you'd have no friends, and you'd die a lonely, bitter old mutant.

Despite the fact that the greater portion of Sonny's work sucks, I love him. Or maybe I love him because of the fact that a lot of his films suck. But still, there's no denying the man's importance in action cinema. His *Street Fighter* movies revolutionized karate films by turning low budget into stylized art and teaching us that as violent and brutal as you thought films already were, he could make them meaner. Plus, the formation of Chiba's Japan Action Club helped train some of the best and brightest action, martial arts, and sci-fi stars of the 70s and 80s.

The movie begins with a sleepy monk throwing out your typical esoteric Yoda prophecies. The subtitles on my copy were flea-sized, so it looked at times like the guy was named either Mad Buddha or Mud Buddha. Whatever the case, his name wasn't Larry. The monk makes a prediction that Conqueror will rise to rule the martial world. Yep, it's the martial world again. This isn't really that great a prediction. I mean, the guy can fly and he's named Conqueror. If you are named Conqueror it pretty much guarantees that you will kick some serious ass, sort of like how if you are named Tiny you will be really huge. But a warlord named Tiny isn't very imposing, so he went with Lord Conqueror.

Unfortunately, the prophecy isn't all wine and roses. Mud Buddha also predicts that Lord Conqueror will be toppled "when wind and cloud combine." Down south, we used to call those tornadoes, and rest assured that they can indeed do some real property damage, even if you are named Lord Conqueror. Upset by this prophecy, Conqueror goes out to collect all the kids born under a certain star and named Cloud or Wind. One of them is the son of one of those dirty ol' beggar looking swordsmen who has a beef against Conqueror anyway. Seems

Conqueror is a big fan of collecting rare and powerful swords, and this guy has one. See, this was back before eBay, so back then if you wanted some weird little antique, you had to search for it at flea markets or challenge people to duels. Years ago, the two dueled in one of the film's most beautiful sequences, a fight amid a lush green forest of bamboo. This entire sequence, though by no means a display of any real martial arts, is positively stunning.

The swordsman loses the duel, and Conqueror makes off with the guy's sexy wife, vowing that they will meet again to fight for ownership of the magic sword. It was cool because something like that happened to me a couple months ago. When the two warriors meet again, they duel on, above, and all around a giant cliff carved into the shape of a towering stone Buddha. This fight is pretty cool as well, with the guys zipping all over the sky much like the fighters in the superb old Ching Siu-tung fantasy film *Duel to Death*. Only this time, instead of wires, it's cgi. Normally, I'm not a huge fan of cgi and other computer animation effects, mainly because I think they look awful. Even supposedly good ones look awful to me, but then, who the hell am I to judge? I still think Ray Harryhausen stop-motion looks cool.

Storm Riders manages to use cgi the way it should be used, however, which is to create a very vivid fantasy world that is only slightly related to reality. It looks great, on par with and quite possibly better than anything done even in big budget American films. There are only a few instances where it looks awkward. For the most part, I thought it was pretty spectacular, and they actually seem to have put a lot of thought into making the effects lush and interesting. Plus, they don't have cgi characters, only backgrounds, landscapes, and of course flying stuff.

The second boy Conqueror goes after is the son of a swordsmith. The fight here isn't nearly as slick, but it's still good, and reminded a lot of the fights in Tsui Hark's last good film, *The Blade*, but that may only be because those guys were all shirtless swordsmiths as well.

Conqueror raises Cloud and Wind as his own sons, with the basic plan being keep your friends close and your enemies closer, I guess. Both of them grow up to be bad-ass super fighters in sexy leather outfits. Aaron, whose character Cloud is the angrier, brooding member of the duo, also adds some flare with the aforementioned cape and blue highlights to his anime hair. Both of them fall in love with Conqueror's daughter, and hey, you would too. She's cute, but there's nothing quite as unnerving as having your girlfriend say, "I want you to come home to meet my father, Lord Conqueror, ruler of the martial world."

Each of the boys is given a task. Wind (Ekin Cheng) is sent out with his other adopted brother, Frost, to capture the legendary Fire Monkey, which you have to find if you want to earn an audience with ol' Mud Buddha. Cloud, who as we said, is a lot more pissed off, is sent on a secret mission to slaughter the members of another powerful martial arts family. Lord Conqueror is on a real slaughter kick these days. But I guess if you are named Conqueror you really do have to get out and, you know, conquer and stuff. It's sort of in the name. You can't be named Lord Conqueror and work a desk job.

Conqueror wants to talk to Mud Buddha about a puzzle box he got many years ago that supposedly contains the last portion of Mud Buddha's prophecy. As he gets older and Wind and Cloud become stronger, Conqueror is starting to go a bit insane with paranoia and wants to make sure he can alter his own Destiny by either controlling or destroying his two star disciples. Plus he's got the survivors of the recently slaughtered clan out for revenge and enlisting the help of an ancient super sword hero played by Anthony Wong in a Gandalf outfit. Everyone figures if anyone can beat Conqueror, it's this guy. So you see, being ruler of the martial world isn't all fun and games. It's sort of like being the mayor of New York, and when you see how much you have to deal with, you kinda have to wonder why you'd want the job.

In fact, now that I think about it, I'd like to see an American version of this movie, with Rudy Giuliani starring as Lord Conqueror.

As if all that wasn't enough, you have this whole thing where Wind and Conqueror's daughter, Charity, are engaged, which pisses off Cloud, who was all moody anyway and walking around like some weird blend of Henry Rollins and Morrissey. I guess you could say he has a dark cloud hanging over him, but if you did say that, I'd kick you in the shins. While Charity likes Wind well enough, she's just as attracted to the dark and mysterious Cloud. This whole love thing sort of drives Cloud batty, and during the wedding he causes a ruckus that eventually leads to Conqueror accidentally killing his own daughter. It's sort of like those America's Funniest Home Video things where the groom's pants fall down or the bride slips and lands on her ass, only this time it's the bride's well nigh all-powerful supernatural father accidentally exploding her with magic energy bolts shot from his hands.

All jokes aside, the emotion of this whole sequence is actually pretty moving, and Aaron rises above his usual limitations as an actor and creates a very memorable, sad scene. The woman's death drives both he and Conqueror even more insane than they already are. Wind goes to reclaim his dead father's magic sword and get some sacred fruit, which is hidden inside the giant stone Buddha cave and guarded by a cool fire monster thing. When both Wind and Cloud learn that Conqueror himself murdered their families, it's time to bring the prophecy to fruition in a jaw-dropping special effects battle that reminded me a lot of the final fight between the duo of Yuen Biao and Meng Hoi against the insanely evil Adam Cheng in *Zu*.

And much like *Zu*, I've managed to account for about 30% of the action that takes place in this wild madcap ride. The rest is left for you, yes you, to discover on your own, because action and adventure and seeking thrills is what this website is all about. Those things, and Hot Pockets.

Storm Riders is not a kungfu film. It's a fantasy film, and as such, it works wonderfully. It is full of action, drama, and insanely wild, cool looking special effects. Most special effects movies tend to forget the human aspect of their story, but *Storm Riders* remembers to make the humans the central players amid the onslaught of slick special effects. The result is delirious, breathtaking, and the most fun film to come out of Hong Kong in a very long time. It's a shame that in the wake of the film's monumental success, rather than follow it up with an equally well-crafted film, the director chose to go for a series of quickie look-alike films of varying quality.

But none of that matters here, and what we're left with is the fact that *Storm Riders* is a tremendously enjoyable, energetic film with an amazing look to it. People who are fond of praising derivative junk like *The Matrix* for its supposed visual style should check this film out to really have their tiny minds blown. It manages to be beautiful, colorful, alien, and sweeping while remaining recognizable. I guess it's what the martial world looks like. But the aspect of the film that really shines is Sonny Chiba, bellowing and laughing in all his evil glory in what is a truly epic comeback film. He looks better than he has in decades, but since he spent much of the last decade making direct-to-video films with Rowdy Roddy Piper, he doesn't have much competition from himself. I was overjoyed to see Sonny in action, even if it's all special effects, and kicking ass for a whole new generation.

I have never read the comic, so I can't comment on how it compares to that, but as a film, *Storm Riders* is totally satisfying to me. In the years to come, as it betters with age, *Storm Riders* will become one of my all time favorite fantasy/mythology films. (by Keith Allison of Teleport City)

Sword of Many Loves (Hong Kong, 1993: Poon Man-Kit) - Wu Fei (Leon Lai) and his uncle Ping are a pair of wandering brick salesmen (Brick salesmen?), who are delivering bricks to the home of exotic hinterland beauty Ling (Michelle Reis). The bricks are for the grave of Ling's recently deceased master, who was chief of a sect of poisoners and possessor of a "medical manual" (distractingly subtitled in English as "medical manure"). Other members of the sect want to get their hands on the manual, and Fei and Ping witness an attempt on Ling's life by a scorpion-eating, tarantula-wielding, underground-burrowing dwarf. After some slapstick involving accidental poisoning and pig's urine, Fei and Ping run away.

Our brickies wander to Nanking where they find that their friend Chung has been framed by Young Fung, son of Master Fung (Tsui Kam-Kong), chief Bad Dude of the area. (Incidentally, the film's most unnecessarily violent scene occurs here when Chung's maddened wife kills her young son. Be warned.) Fei and Ping intervene, leading to a confrontation with Master Fung in which Ping is killed. Fei vows revenge but wisely retreats to fight another day. Along the road Fei meets the beautiful Purple Yuen (Cheung Man), who is attempting to stop the various martial arts leaders from being distracted from their proper task of restoring the Ming Dynasty by a government-sponsored martial arts contest. Her strategy is to beat everyone and win the title herself. Traveling together, romance develops between Fei and Yuen. In a scene that is both silly and erotic, Fei seduces Yuen by covering her in molasses (?). At the last minute, Yuen shows magnificent self-restraint, leaving Fei bewildered.

After washing up, Fei confronts Master Fung. Armed this time with molasses and watermelons, Fei nearly kills Fung but is stopped at the last minute by Yuen, who turns out to be Fung's daughter. However, because Fung killed her mother's family and caused her mother to commit suicide, Yuen only stops Fei so that she might later have the opportunity to kill Fung herself. Yuen is poisoned by Fung's trickery, and Fei takes her to Ling to be cured. Despite her earlier contempt, Ling now fancies Fei and tells him she will only cure Yuen if Fei gives Yuen up. There follows some classic HK relationship comedy hijinks involving a put-upon Fei and two pouting, grumpy women. Then an accident reveals that Yuen is...no, not a man, but a nun! After some angsty and an amusing cat fight, our heroes attend the martial arts contest and find a plot to kill all the martial arts sects. Pandemonium ensues, culminating in a final showdown between Master Fung and Fei in a sandstorm.

Putting it mildly, the plot of *The Sword of Many Loves* meanders a little. It's not quite picaresque, but it takes its time to get to the point, which is fine. You can probably tell that the film does little to steer away from wuxia clichés, but avoiding them would be like having a US action film without a revenge motive or a token love interest. Director Poon Man-Kit does a pretty competent job, including the requisite skewed angles and ebullient kineticism. The editing is something of a tour de force, being so frenetic that it's often hard to tell what's going on. Though it might seem strange, I always see this as a plus; it gives these films an impressionistic quality that fits well with the subject matter. The action scenes are also engaging. Though not as flashy as other films, the set pieces at least don't bog down the film.

The performances are pretty good. Those who have seen Leon Lai in recent dramas and romantic comedies might find this hard to believe: his acting is usually uncompromisingly wooden. But in *Sword of Many Loves* he projects the persona of a happy-go-lucky swordsman with apparent ease. Leon, what happened? Cheung Man is Cheung Man—one of the leading wuxia starlets of the period. However, here she gets to appear in some really great scenes, especially the one with the molasses. Yes, yes, the molasses...

Anyway, Michelle Reis also does well as the scheming siren Ling. At its core the role of Ling is pretty much the Kiddo role Reis played in *Swordsman II*. You wouldn't want to cast her in Hamlet, but she does this sort of thing pretty well—and she looks great in Minority People's clothing. Tsui Kam-Kong is the villain, as he was in so many other films at the time. Perhaps the only unusual aspect of his role here is that he has to convey a very unhealthy relationship with his son, which he does convincingly, to the discomfort of all.

But the genius of *Sword of Many Loves* lies not in its acting, nor in its story, nor in its action scenes, but in its many surreal and scatological moments, i.e. the dwarf, the molasses, the pig's urine, Cheung Man and Michelle Reis together in a bath while poison rains around them, the melting spiders, the scorpion mastication, the horse that cries "Help me!" at a time of stress, the unexpected moment of noble self-sacrifice, the bit where Leon Lai gets pushed in a ditch, the poison-induced body part inflation, etc. Yes, it's low humor, but low humor at its finest. It's also completely incidental to the plot, which on paper looks more like a tragic bloodbath ala *The Barefoot Kid*. Consequently, the presence of humor is all the more surprising and welcome.

It's fair to say that they don't make them like this anymore (they were pretty hard pressed to make them like this back then). Recent "historical" Hong Kong comedies like *Chinese Odyssey 2002* and *Cat and Mouse*, while possessing their moments, seem self-conscious and leaden compared to the eye-popping craziness of *Sword of Many Loves* and other films of its ilk 10 to 15 years ago. In those days they could make crazy films without even trying.

And *Sword of Many Loves* is also the complete antithesis of the current "Holy Trinity" of arthouse-wuxia films: *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, *Hero*, and *House of Flying Daggers*. For instance, *Sword of Many Loves* totally fails to muster any symbolic use of color, any exquisite landscapes, any quiet, brooding performances by veteran megastars, or any coded ruminations on contemporary Chinese politics. It doesn't even have any tasty shots of Zhang Ziyi. Similarly, *Crouching Tiger* et al completely fail to manifest a fast-tunnelling dwarf or a hero who skates into battle on watermelon rinds.

Of course it's hardly fair comparing a non-serious film to a deadly serious one. But in my mind, the wuxia classics of the early 1990s are better than the "Holy Trinity" films, simply because they're fun and unpretentious. Well, you could debate this forever, but I can honestly say that if you like early 1990s HK wuxia films, you really should get your hands on a copy of *Sword of Many Loves*. (by Stuart McDonald of LoveHKFilm)

Sword Stained With Royal Blood (Hong Kong, 1993: Cheung Hoi-Ching) - [This is an interesting case in how the same source material can yield two completely different stories, or in how two writers can make completely different decisions in how to adapt said source material. The 1981 Chang Cheh film was a lean, stripped-down affair with a fairly linear story, backed up by some flashbacks to give us the background into some of the characters' relationships. This film, however, takes the same exact story and just goes bonkers with it. It's about as coherent as *Kung Fu Cult Master* and *Swordsman*, other 90s attempts to adapt 900-page Jin Yong novels into 100-minute movies. I was initially hoping that this one would be a complement to the Chang Cheh classic, but no, it's same story, but with more extraneous characters included.

The general idea is that Yuen Shing-Chi (Yuen Biao in this version, Kuo Chi in the earlier one) is the son of an unlawfully-executed lawman who has grown up into a kung fu master and a righteous lawman himself. In both films, he gets involved with the ambitious Wan family and a

mysterious swordsman known as the Golden Snake Man (Danny Lee in this film), with a romantic subplot involving Yuen and Ching Ching (Elsie Yeh here, Candy Wen in the other), a young girl from the Wan Clan. Whereas the '81 film had Golden Snake Man be already dead and Yuen Shing-Chi avenging wrongs committed against him by the Wan Family, this film has the Golden Snake Man very much alive, which makes the story a bit complicated. Throw in a power-hungry Manchurian eunuch, a Ming Princess (Sharla Cheung Man) and the villainous Poison Sect (led by Anita Yuen), and things get confusing very early. In a nutshell, the Wan Patriarch needs Golden Snake Man's sword to rule the martial world, Golden Snake Man wants to get revenge on Wan for slaughtering his village and stealing his woman, and Yuen Shing-Chi wants to uphold righteousness, until the end, when he discovers that the Wans were participants in his father's betrayal...I think. I also learned that the titular Sword Stained with Royal Blood is not the snake sword, as the 1981 film might have you believe, but a separate, equally-powerful weapon.]

This movie was pure entertainment to me. It had its fair share of flaws, but the good far outweighs the bad. The biggest problem is also one of the film's biggest advantages, the crazy fast pace.. But it isn't fast like *The Raid* with a dumb story to put big focus on the action... Instead, it has a good story, with many colorful characters, AND plenty of (effect heavy) action...which makes it a little tough to wrap your head around what's going on. (It didn't help that the burnt in subs were hard to read and also partially cut off.)

Sometimes the transition from action to plot/dialogue scenes is incredibly jarring and fast. All in all the fast pace works in its favor though, as it was never TOO confusing to keep me from enjoying the great characters, action, and comedy. The action is wire and effect heavy, and often so frantic that it is hard to tell what's going on....but again, as soon as you think it is getting too confusing, a good bit of swordplay or fun(ny) effects will show up to keep you highly entertained. Our characters have magic weapons, and abilities, as well as your typical wire-fu feats!

The overall feel of the film is also great. It has a fantastic cast of colorful characters, and all 4 of the major leads (Yuen Biao, Danny Lee, Sharla Cheung Man, and Elvis Tsui) do a good job so it isn't really worth mentioning any one. The tone is a good mix of dark, comedy, and fantasy. I actually found myself laughing (intentionally) often throughout the first half of the film. Ng Man Tat was hilarious as a goofy old, crazy master-type, and Sharla Cheung cracked me up often as well. As confusing as the fast paced plot can be at times, I still ended up feeling for the characters. I felt the major twist was pretty surprising and I liked it; but the film moves so fast that it's hard to pick out any big plot holes the first time through, lol.

I liked this movie very much, but I acknowledge its flaws and see how some may not like it. I am looking forward to watching it again to be able to keep up with things a little better. The story took me a while to make sense of it, but the break neck pace kept me entertained til' I did.. I usually am not a fan of effect and wire heavy flicks, but I ate it up this time! I have only seen a handful of 90s martial arts films, but I can already recognize similarities in camera angles and overall style between this and say the *OUATIC* movies.. Looking forward to exploring this era of martial arts flicks a little more. (by Blake Matthews and Matthew Bowling)

Swordsman (Hong Kong, 1990: King Hu, Ann Hui, Tony Ching Siu-Tung, Tsui Hark, Raymond Lee, Andrew Kam) - One of the surprise success stories of Hong Kong cinema in 1990 was *Swordsman* – a film that attempted to combine the traditional elements of the swordplay film with the modern production aspects that were associated with directors like Tsui Hark and Ching Siu-Tung. The main success of the film was not in its respectable box-office figures

though; the memorable triumph of the film was the introduction of the new-wave swordplay film and the artistic importance this new sub-genre had on 90's Hong Kong film-making. *Swordsman's* influence was seen in the following years not only with the two sequels that followed, but also in the popular Hong Kong hits that were subsequently produced i.e. *Ashes Of Time* and the remake of *Dragon Gate Inn*. Even Cantopop idols like Andy Lau, Aaron Kwok and Leon Lai were appearing in new-wave swordplay films and their influence is also seen in some of Chow Sing-Chi's traditional works.

The character-heavy plot of *Swordsman* centres on the quest by numerous clans for the sacred 'Sunflower Scriptures', a martial arts manual that, it is rumoured, offers any practitioner almost supernatural abilities. When these scrolls are stolen from the royal library, the finger of suspicion points at nearly every clan in China and the real thief's identity becomes submerged in intrigue. The Royal Eunuchs send out one of their loyal and cruel puppet-clans to retrieve the scrolls at all costs and stop this untold power getting into the wrong (or right) hands. Into this powderkeg-situation wanders swordsman Ling and his young assistant Kiddo who belong to the well-respected Hwa Mountain Clan and are travelling back to their master. Ling discovers the location of the scrolls from a clan chief named Lin who, as he slowly dies from wounds inflicted by the Royal Eunuchs' lackeys, entrusts the honourable swordsman with the secret and asks him to tell his missing son about it. Unbeknownst to them both, Lin's son has been killed and an impostor from the royal court has taken his place in an attempt to find out the secret. After encounters with a whole host of clans and warriors, Ling also begins to wonder if his own master is as innocent as he pretends to be and if there is anyone who isn't prepared to betray or back-stab in order to own the 'Sunflower Scriptures'.

Swordsman is undoubtedly a film that improves with successive viewings. Initial impressions are that this is a convoluted and confusing swordplay film that attracts the eye with its visual flair, but is ultimately easier to admire than to warm to. However, on second and especially third viewing, 'Swordsman' reveals more of its hidden depths and draws the now prepared viewer into its character-laden storyline. It is certainly true that this gradual appreciation for the film develops into more than just a cold admiration and stands out as an engrossing new-wave film. This doesn't mean that it is ever easy to understand though; the abundance of protagonists and the endless intrigues make sure that even a momentary lapse of concentration is punished. The labyrinthine plotting is not helped by the film's troubled production as the directorial responsibilities were shared by seasoned helmers like King Hu, Ching Siu-Tung and Tsui Hark with various styles sometimes at odds with each other. The main credit for director is afforded to King Hu with the legendary craftsman's ability to combine tension and a complex narrative becoming increasingly apparent. Nevertheless, the three co-directors each give some indication as to their own thoughts on how the film should develop; this can make for a very unwieldy package.

Patient viewers can rest assured though as *Swordsman* is well worth the time spent viewing it. The visual vibrancy of the film and the sheer magic of the swordplay genre give the film a constantly entertaining feel. The film's vast plethora of characters and clans are strangely engrossing too as the viewer feels privy to this beguiling world. In the lead role, Samuel Hui is a major attraction of the film with his acting abilities and unique screen presence easily compensating his lack of sword skills. Jet Li would go on to take the character of Ling to the next level of physical skills in the sequel, but Hui is excellent as the main character and gives the film a sympathetic lead. Jacky Cheung makes a surprisingly effective villain with his creeping sycophantic character making a perfect villain for Ling. Fans of this genre will also be pleased that the action – though fantastical – is inventive and deftly handled by Ching Siu-Tung and co. *Swordsman* is not as strong as its superior sequel and the aforementioned difficulties are all apparent, but it is still an ultimately rewarding film. (by Andrew Saroch of Far East Films)

Swordsman 2 (Hong Kong, 1992: Tony Ching Siu-Tung) – aka *Legend of the Swordsman* - The second part of an epic trilogy of films that would help revitalize the sagging wuxia genre, as well as inspire loads of imitators. HK superstars Jet Li and Brigitte Lin appear in career-solidifying roles. A must-see of the genre.

What is a hero? That is one of the many questions posed in the Tsui Hark-produced film *Swordsman II*, a free adaptation of the Jin Yong (Louis Cha) novel *Xiao Ao Jiang Hu*. With Ching Siu-Tung at the helm, *Swordsman II* avoids the dangers of sequel-itis. In comparison to the first film, it's far more focused and emerges as the superior movie in the series. And even more intriguing, it shows a willingness go to places that a traditional popcorn film wouldn't even dare.

Set in the Ming Dynasty, *Swordsman II* continues the tale of carefree Ling Wu-Chung (Jet Li) and his tomboy sidekick Kiddo (Michelle Reis). Disheartened by their master's betrayal in the first film, the two comrades have decided to retire from the martial arts world along with their Wah Mountain brothers. With the world of violence and conflict a distant memory, Ling can focus on something more important - women. Just as in the first film, young Kiddo has a crush on Ling, and tries desperately to shed her tomboy image, but to no avail.

Complicating matters is the fact that Ling has feelings for Highlander Ying (Rosamund Kwan) whom he and his brothers have agreed to meet one last time before retirement. Ying's father Wu is the rightful leader of the Sun Moon Sect, but has been double-crossed and imprisoned by the mysterious and powerful Asia the Invincible (Brigitte Lin) - the possessor of the much-desired Sacred Scroll. And if Ling's girl troubles weren't enough, he meets the elegant Asia and ends up falling for her!

However, Ling has an even bigger problem, and it has nothing to do with respecting the feelings of the other two gals. Asia the Invincible? She's a he! Yep, it turns out that the Sacred Scroll that everybody and their eunuch wanted to get their grubby little paws on in the first flick has one major drawback: to achieve ultimate supernatural power, one must castrate himself. Yikes.

Naively, swordsman Ling embarks on a relationship with the villain, not knowing Asia's true identity (Asia looks like Brigitte Lin, so who can blame him?). While our hero is occupied elsewhere, Asia and his AZN pride posse attack and brutally slaughter the Wah mountain swordsmen. Vowing to avenge his fallen comrades, Ling leads a rag-tag group in an assault on Asia's stronghold on Blackwood Cliff. At the film's climax, the secret of Asia the Invincible is revealed...but with surprising results.

Simply put, this is a great movie. On a basic level, *Swordsman II* has a great plot with all sorts of fantastic swordplay and swell special effects. In addition, there are a number of fine performances from leading HK actors. Jet Li is superb as Ling, a man who laughs, drinks, and beds a woman, a role that is a far cry from the stoic Wong Fei-Hung. As for the women, Michelle Reis is the sexiest tomboy this side of *Chungking Express*'s Faye Wong and Brigitte Lin was so good in this film, that besides starring in the sequel *The East is Red*, she ended up playing variations on her Asia role in a few other movies.

As I mentioned earlier, one of the most fascinating aspects of the film is its willingness to explore taboo subjects. Sexuality and morality are definitely the big issues here. In the film, Ling clearly has romantic feelings for Asia, even after finding out his/her dark secret. Jet Li in

love with a guy? That's pretty bold. And the resulting questioning of morality is interesting. What is Good? What is Evil? If evil Asia is capable of love is he/she still Evil? Many compelling questions are tossed around in this film, which could have been a simple Jet Li crowd pleaser in a lesser director's hands.

Also, the sequel continues the deconstruction of the hero archetype. As one character wonders, "May I ask, who is the Hero of Heroes?" The "unjustly" imprisoned Wu isn't, since he turns out to be a ruthless, bloodthirsty man, a monster far worse than Asia the Invincible. What about the villain? From Asia's point of view, his desire to establish Sun Moon Sect as the dominant clan and overthrow the empire are borne out of his love for his people and his country. Despite all his savagery, Asia truly believes he'll be remembered as a hero, not a perverted arch villain.

Even Ling Wu-Chung, a man caught in the middle, cannot completely fulfill the role of the fabled Hero of Heroes. Though one can sympathize with Ling's wish for a life of seclusion on Ox Mountain, the film suggests that turning our backs on the conflicts of the world is not the answer, for they will eventually catch up with us. As Wu says in a rare moment of lucidity, "Wherever there are people, there is conflict."

Truly great sequels are hard to find, especially in Hong Kong, where cranking out cheapie follow-ups has become a common practice. But *Swordsman II* is a polished piece of work, easily surpassing the achievements of its predecessor. Unlike most popcorn flicks, *Swordsman II* will resonate with the audience long after its over. (by Calvin McMillin of LoveHKFilm)

Tai Chi 2 (Hong Kong, 1996: Yuen Woo-Ping) - By 1996, movies like *Tai Chi 2* were already an anachronism. The wire-fu period pieces that had covered the Hong Kong cinematic landscape during the first half of the 1990s had already fallen out of favor, the big nail in the coffin being the colossal failure of Tsui Hark's deconstructionist wuxia film *The Blade*. From 1995 onward, Hong Kong filmmakers were looking increasingly outward to international audiences, making action movies in the mold of Hollywood blockbusters, while some stars and directors were trying to set themselves up in Hollywood itself. Jet Li took something of a temporary leave from the period pieces that made him famous to make a fairly unsuccessful (at least in Hong Kong) bid at being a modern action star. Donnie Yen, still not the household name in Hong Kong that he is now, tried his hand at directing with a few low-budget projects. There just wasn't much room in Hong Kong for period pieces, and when they did come back, they were a completely different creature than they had been before.

Obviously, that didn't stop a few brave cineastas from trying to resurrect the otherwise dead genre. Yuen Woo-Ping had built his career on old school chopsockeys and then had been ignored by critics whenever he tried to make a modern-day action film during the 1980s. However, once Tsui Hark had brought the genre back in 1990, starting with *The Swordsman*, Yuen Woo-Ping found himself getting more work and the critical acclaim he had failed to garner during the previous decade. It isn't surprising that he'd keep on trying to make the sort of kung fu movie that had been so good to his career before, even when audiences ultimately proved to be indifferent to his efforts.

The movie begins with the retirement of a famous tai chi master named Yeung (Yu Hoi, of *Shaolin Temple* and *Ninja Over the Great Wall*). Yeung wishes to get away from the so-called "Martial World" in order to dedicate himself to raising his son, Hok-Man (who'll be played by Wu Jing of *SPL* and *Fatal Move*—the original subtitles refer to him as "Hawk Man"). Hok-Man knows his father is a martial arts bad-ass, and yearns to be one to, but has been forbidden by

dad to learn kung fu. Instead, he spends most of his youth locked up in a room with his queue tied to the ceiling reading Chinese literary classics with his cousin, Ah Sang (Tam Chiu). Of course, being the mischievous sort, Hok-Man and his cousin have actually been studying martial arts in secret, encouraged by Hok-Man's feisty mother (Girls n' Guns veteran Sibelle Hu, who has never looked more beautiful than she does here).

One day Hok-Man and Ah Sang sneak out of the house to go see the world around them. While performing a lion dance at a local village ritual, Hok-Man sets his eyes on Rose (Christy Chung of Bodyguard from Beijing), the Westernized daughter of local official Tsao (Lau Shun of *Once Upon a Time in China 3* and *Blade of Fury*). Rose is engaged to another official, Wing (*The Peking Opera Blues'* Mark Cheng), but her modern education puts her at odds with the local tradition of arranged marriages. Hok-Man immediately falls head over heels with her and gets involved with Rose's efforts to promote democracy and protest against the British selling opium to the locals. That quickly gets him trouble with the law, with the unscrupulous British opium dealers (led by Darren Shahlavi of *Ip Man 2* and *Alien Agent*), with his own dad, and with one of his dad's former rivals, the Northern King of Kicks (Billy Chow, of *Fist of Legend* and *Tough Beauty and Sloppy Slop*). Thank goodness all those years of reading martial arts manuals has made Hok-Man almost as good as his dad, not to mention the whole business of having his queue tied to the ceiling has transformed his pigtail into a deadly lash weapon with its own Spider Sense. No, I'm not making that last part up.

Robert Tai, the Taiwanese action director best known for giving us ninjas on tarantulas and Alice Tseng's naked breast fu in films like *Ninja: The Final Duel* and *Shaolin Dolemite*, once criticized Yuen Woo-Ping as being all out of good ideas and thus becoming increasingly repetitive in his action design. I can see that to some extent; most of his 1990s films contained at least one homage to one of his old school chopsocky movies. In *Tai Chi 2*, we have several homages to numerous films of his. The whole queue-as-a-weapon bit had already been done by Yuen Woo-Ping in the obscure John Woo movie *Fists of the Double K* and then again in the 1993 Donnie Yen film *Heroes Among Heroes*. Gai Chun-Wah (*Kids from Shaolin* and *New Legend of Shaolin*) is essentially playing Iron Head Rat from *The Drunken Master*. The finale is a sort of low-rent rip-off of the climax to *Once Upon a Time in China*, which Yuen's brothers had choreographed. There's a moment in the finale when Wu Jing delivers three consecutive over-the-shoulder kicks to a guy's head, which Donnie had done in Yuen's *In the Line of Duty IV*. So yeah, people familiar with Yuen Woo-Ping's work will no doubt feel a bit of déjà-vu while watching this movie.

That said, the actual martial arts action is pretty spectacular, aside from the wire-fu stunts in the finale, which are the sloppiest that Yuen Woo-Ping has orchestrated in his career. The tai chi on display in the fights—and unlike Jet Li's *The Tai Chi Master*, there's a lot of tai chi in this film—is simply top notch and Yuen shows us once more that no director is better at portraying the style on film than he is. Yuen also makes an effort to give each set piece its own personality. When Billy Chow fights Yu Hoi at the beginning, the fight begins with them having a verbal duel, calling their moves out and then declaring what they'll do to counter the other's attack. Later, when Chow challenges Wu Jing, the two have a wire-fu fight in a bamboo forest, which is impressive. There's an extended fight on roller skates midway through the movie, not to mention a mantis fist kung fu fight between Wu Jing and Yu Hoi, too. Let's not forget the tango sequence that ends with Wu Jing performing some wushu-enhanced break dancing. As derivative as the finale may be, one must give it credit for it allowing Billy Chow to be heroic for once. The action is good enough that it more than makes up for a lead who tries to channel Jackie Chan from *The Drunken Master* but without the natural charisma and a script full of plot holes (how exactly does a British opium dealer become a better kung fu fighter than nearly every member of the kung fu-savvy cast?). Heck, I'll give the movie a pass simply for having a

romantic subplot that actually goes somewhere, as opposed to all that unrequited love crap that we've been getting since *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. (by Blake Matthews)

Tai Chi Master (Hong Kong, 1993: Yuen Woo-Ping) – aka *Twin Warriors* - Jet Li was a monk in Shaolin. In a friendly competition for a higher place in Shaolin, he was betrayed and framed for using weapons (which cannot be used in the competition). He and his friend got kicked out of the Shaolin. They met rebellions at that time of China. His friend betrayed Jet Li and his rebellion friends for money from the China government. Jet Li went crazy and discovered the art of Tai Chi at the recover period. Revenge seem to be the only thing he is going to do.

I bought a Jet Li pack that was sent out by Dimension a few years back. It included most of his classics, butchered and without the original language track. For the most part, these "versions" were pretty decent with good picture, but basically fuckin' up what the film was, cutting scenes and replacing the dialog. But *Tai Chi Master* or as it's known here *Twin Warriors* still remained my favorite Jet Li flick, just because it had great fight scenes, and good characters for one thing. Michelle Yeoh is a great presence (for what she is given in her short role), and made movies like *Police Story 3* and *Tomorrow Never Dies* worth seeing, and in this as well. Yuen Wo-Ping directed this flick, and you can tell, the fight scenes are some of my favorite, not because they stand out like your Jackie Chan/Benny "The Jet" style, but they just are loads of fuckin' fun. The story is average, but the characters are pretty damn cool, I especially thought that Siu-hou Chin (Chin Bo) had a great transition to the main villain of the film. But this film remains as one of my favorites, for the sheer fact that it never gets old. Plus, you get to see Jet Li act like a crazy and talk to ducks. Who the fuck decided that?

I've had so many people talk to me and tell me how this film is a big piece of shit. Then I find out that they watched the dubbed version. Don't get me wrong, the film is basically corn and the dramatic scenes can basically be thrown out the window if you choose to follow the dubbed version. The original version isn't a dramatic masterpiece either, but it is far more better than what Dimension decided to throw at me. The story is simple, two students get kicked out of the Shaolin Temple and go to the streets. They are taken in by a woman who they saved, who happens to be a rebel. Jet's character is the peaceful one and Chin's character is the one who wants all the power. So as you know it, Jet goes with the rebels, and Chin goes with the army. Chin becomes powerful and eventually it gets to his head. Jet can't believe that Chin turns on him, so he goes crazy (yeah). To cure his craziness (HE IS CER-RAZY) he learns Tai Chi and eventually goes and kills Chin.

Jet is a clown in this film, if you are expecting a *Fist of Legend* type from the great one, don't look here. Now the crazy scenes in general always make me laugh for some strange reason because as I'm laughing my head is telling me that "this isn't funny." Ah yes, Jet grows out the long luscious locks for this role as well, and succeeds through his hero role. Michelle Yeoh is always worth having in a film, even if her part is minor. She plays second-string to Jet in this flick and stays that way for the entire film. Unlike her stealing the screen when she worked with Jackie Chan (who rules), she wasn't as big as a part in this flick. But don't get me wrong, her fight later down the road was great, and she is worth what time she is on the screen. Siu-hou Chin plays the major bad guy in the flick, and I actually liked his performance. His character actually had a plot, instead of just falling into things. The character on the spot, never made a weird decision to become powerful. Chin and Jet have good chemistry, and when you see their fight at the end, everything gets thrown to the shed, and they deliver the goods.

Yuen-Wo Ping is a great action director (didn't see that fucker did ya?) and this film shows his greatness. Wire work usually pisses me off, I hate flying around and shit like that. But in this film, it is used to the right extent. Some of the fight scenes are just so good, I actually do rewind them to watch them again. When Michelle Yeoh was fighting the General, that fight scene looked good and was completely full of awesome moves, and unique characteristics. But the scene in general that I will always love will have to belong to the fight between Chin and Jet when they are fighting on the wood pile, that fight in general was great because it maintained the balance of the fighters and the delivery of those harsh blows. Amongst all of it, this film looks really good, and shows what Yuen-Wo Ping can do when he is behind the camera. I mean take the basic story apart and you've got kung-fu student learns a "special" technique to defeat his foe. I guess you could sum it up to that, but some of the visuals, mostly when Jet is utilizing his new found skills (making those leaves come together) are just plain gravy. That's a good thing.

This film is one of my favorites because it has everything I want in a film. It has a great cast of characters, a good enough story, and shitloads of action sequences done by the best action director of all time. It's a shame that they haven't made a DVD that is quality to what this film dishes out (the other version isn't the best). See it, the film contains three superstars working under the same sheet and everything falls out the way that it should. They made a Tai Chi II, which had little to do with this flick, and sucked. Take this in, everything looks good and hey, you can take a look at Jet Li drinking water off the ground, that has to be better than him fighting himself in the future and kicking the shit out of Mel Gibson right? This is a MUST SEE flick of the genre, and worth every penny. (by Edward Tang of LoveAsianFilm)

Tale from the East, A (Hong Kong, 1990: Manfred Wong) - A group of friends are partying and having a good time in the woods when an electrical storm erupts. The celestial alignment in the sky only happens every two hundred years and it is being used as a time portal by a young princess who is in possession of a thousand-year-old pearl. The veil blood clan desperately wants the pearl and they have sent assassins after the princess. The princess is protected by a warrior named Jiang and they are separated during the electrical storm. Will the pearl end up in the hands of the evil veil blood clan or will Jiang save the princess in the nick of time?

Tales from the East unsuccessfully tries to mix comedy with supernatural themes. The film has many solid action sequences and this is the more entertaining moments in the film. The comedy bits in this film are hit and miss with most attempts at humor missing the mark. Manfred Wong who directed this film also has a minor role as an Uncle in the film. Wong's direct is standard for these types of films from this era in Hong Kong. The acting in this film is nothing special with the only stand out performance being that of Billy Lau. Famous music cues from films like *Ghostbusters* and *The Untouchables* make an appearance in *Tales from the East*. Overall *Tales from the East's* premise is not that well thought out and the various lead characters are lack any charisma. (by 10,000 Bullets)

Temptation of a Monk (Hong Kong, 1993: Clara Law) - Eat at the time to eat. Sleep at the time to sleep. Die at the time to die". If these words seem nonsensical, empty of much real meaning or plainly pretentious to you, especially when you see them appear on screen at the point that they do in this absolutely atypical Hong Kong film (which nonetheless was actually produced by Teddy Robin Kwan!), then the chances are sky high that this 1993 Clara Law work won't be at all to your liking. For my part, they suitably capped the kind of cinematic experience that filled me with awe at the ability of the filmmaker(s) to simultaneously (re)create a world unlike any this (re)viewer had previously seen, yet endow it with enough

understandable -- even if not sympathetic -- situations and characters for me to emotionally connect with as well intellectually comprehend.

Before anything else, let me point out that I don't know much about the customs, ways of life, outfits, hairstyles and particular histories of princes, princesses, other nobles, generals, other military men and other denizens of the Tang Dynasty (618-906 A.D.). Hence, I cannot judge whether the costumes, deportment and behavior of the individuals depicted in *Temptation of a Monk* truly conform to those of actual people who lived during that temporally distant period of Chinese history. For the purposes of this film though, I'd hazard to suggest that perhaps authenticity matters less here than the utilization of such elements to place certain intriguing characters in incredibly visually fascinating settings and dramatically interesting circumstances.

Although Joan Chen is its headlined star, and does have two roles in the approximately two-hour length work (one as an imperial princess named Scarlet; another as a woman who identifies herself as Violet, the widow of a general), she actually is not its focus. Neither is it the Mainland Chinese superstar actor, Zhang Fengyi (who has the part of General Huo Da, the politically astute right hand man of the ambitious Prince Shi Min). Instead, *Temptation of a Monk's* central character is portrayed by Wu Hsing Kuo, and he is absolutely superb as the individual who is first viewed holding the position of highest ranking commander of the Crown Prince's guards.

At least half an hour of film goes by before Wu's General Shi Yang Sheng -- and five of his military, and not particularly pious, men -- opt to retreat to a monastery. An additional fifteen minutes or so of this Category III rated production unfolds before any monks are shown being exposed and enticed to partake in such forbidden pleasures as meat consumption and the viewing of all manners of performative entertainment as well as the naked breasts of obviously loose women along with participation in the sex act itself. From one point of view, it could be argued that all before that which is signaled by a location shift that takes place about fifteen minutes after the one hour mark -- and also the introduction of a fourth not insignificant character (an elderly sprite of an Abbot played by Michael Lee, who is given to make such observations as: "Here is here, there is there, why use your heart to think?") -- is but a prelude to, and setting up of, what may be considered to really matter.

However, this is not at all to say that nothing of note takes place prior to that. Indeed, an alien looking dance performance (that would not look out of place in a higher order sci-fi fantasy) that is part of a large-scale formal ceremony with religious overtones, a post deer hunt meeting between a couple of bloodied men and a noble woman and her entourage plus a fateful conversation over an ostensibly friendly game of chess prove to be but well staged and shot plot preludes for such as: Imperial fratricide condoned by the father after he had been told by one son that the others had had adultery with his favorite concubine; and the catalytic act of a mother (played by Lisa Lu) that truly drives home an emotional point to -- as well as manages to elicit a difficult promise from -- her well-meaning but consequently guilt-ridden son.

Though its pace is mannered and style is most definitely "arthouse", the generally austere feeling *Temptation of a Monk* certainly does have its share of brutal and bloody actions (including decapitations), not just conversation, monologues and meditations! Still, it was the less violent -- and indeed, many of the non-verbal -- moments of this spellbinding film that had the most impact on, as well as impressed, me. I'm not sure whether it's Clara Law, co-cinematographers Arthur Wong and Andrew Lesnie or co-scriptwriters Eddie Fong and Lillian Lee who most deserve credit for having a wonderful eye for the kind of details that truly aid

the overall presentation of an unusual and ultimately moving story. Whoever it is, and especially considering that he/she/they had but a paltry by Hollywood standards US\$ 3.5 million to work with, I reckon that we're talking about a dream factory miracle worker (or two or more) here.

A couple of technical notes: 1) The subtitled translations appear to be -- gasp! -- well nigh perfect; and 2) the blue tinge that envelopes the bulk of the picture from when the tale moves to the setting of the more secluded monastery apparently are part of Clara Law's stunningly singular visual conception. (by YTSL of View from the Brooklyn Bridge)

Terra Cotta Warrior, A (Hong Kong, 1990: Ching Siu-Tung) - The tyrannical first emperor of China wishes to live forever, and doesn't really care how many of his subjects get sacrificed in the quest for immortality. A soldier (Zhang Yimou) becomes his most favoured general after thwarting an assassination attempt, but falls in love with an unwilling concubine (Gong Li). When their affair is discovered they are sentenced to death, but she slips her lover an immortality pill before he is coated in terracotta to become a statue in the emperor's tomb. Many centuries later, a presumably reincarnated Gong Li is a shallow, vain actress filming near the undiscovered tomb...

Zhang Yimou and Gong Li were famously lovers in real life, and probably Chinese cinema's hottest couple after making *Red Sorghum*, though as far as I know this was the first time Zhang had appeared in front of the camera. When Ching Siu-Tung and Tsui Hark decided to shoot the film on the mainland, they apparently concluded that the pair were the best local candidates for the lead roles - a somewhat inspired casting choice... though I wonder if the requirement to use local actors was mandated by the Chinese authorities.

Terra Cotta Warrior has long been near-impossible to see, and as a Tsui Hark/Ching Siu-Tung collaboration with such unusual leads, it was something of a "holy grail". Thankfully the film finally received not one but two dvd releases recently, in China and France. The problem with waiting to see a film for so long is that the anticipation can build up a level of hope/expectation that no film can match... though in this case I think I'd gone through that and out the other side, so I think my assessment is fair - it's an ambitious and interesting film that's good, but not great.

The production is certainly a grand one, aiming to recreate both ancient China and the less ancient China of the 1930's. The use of real locations and a small army of extras certainly helps with the former, but the latter is mainly accomplished through some old-fashioned clothing and a car or two. I'm not sure if it's because of the contrast with the ancient setting that the 1930's sections seem quite contemporary, or just that they're not that well realised. It didn't seem unconvincing, so I'll assume it's the former.

Gong Li is of course one of the most famous, popular and talented actresses from China (and beautiful too), and she gets chance to show some range here - her concubine character is a reserved, sophisticated and melancholic character like those she is most well known for playing. Her 1930's character is the complete opposite - air-headed, shallow and noisy... quite strange to see her acting so, but she is just as good. I watched the film in Cantonese, which is not her native language, but whoever dubbed her voice(s) did a good job. I'd like to see how the film fares in Mandarin some day.

Zhang Yimou is famous for eliciting exceptional performances from his cast, having nurtured both Gong Li and Zhang Ziyi into stardom. This suggests he has an excellent grasp of the art of

acting himself - but unfortunately this does not translate to being a great actor himself. His performance lacks the depth of those around him, making his character seem a bit forgettable.

Yu Rong Guang fares much better as the villainous playboy actor Bai Yunfei, calling on all his over-the-top charm and menace to make far more memorable use of his screen-time. Villains always have the advantage that they can get away with over-acting, of course.

Peter Pau's visuals are mostly impressive, though not his greatest work. Things do sometimes look a little cheap, probably because of the equipment being used and because the special effects scenes actually were done on the cheap (relatively speaking). Ching Siu-Tung often has ambitious ideas that far exceed the budget he has to implement them, but credit to him for trying anyway.

The last thing worth mentioning is probably the score, which is another fine effort from Romeo Diaz and James Wong.

Overall, *Terra Cotta Warrior* is a film that has a lot going for it, but fails to really deliver on the emotional level. Although the story is a potentially compelling one (enough for them to rip off huge parts of it for *The Myth* anyway!), elements seem poorly thought out and don't quite make sense - which took me "out of the film" too much. Additionally, Zhang Yimou's rather wooden performance makes the romance between himself and Gong Li seem quite unconvincing (ironically), which cuts out the emotional heart of the film. As such, it engaged me more intellectually and aesthetically than emotionally, which is enough to prevent it being "great", though it's sufficiently enjoyable despite this to be a strong "good". (by MrBooth of HKMDB)

13 Cold-Blooded Eagles (Hong Kong, 1993: Chui Fat) - When the period piece action film in Hong Kong became popular again in the early 1990s, it was a slightly different creature than it had been back in the 1970s. Like the ol' days, studios produced both kung fu movies and wuxia pian, or swordplay dramas. Both films took advantage of the advances in wire-stunt orchestration, which meant that any actor, regardless of martial ability (or lack thereof), could be hoisted about on wires and look like a martial artist or swordsman of sorts (and it would be easier to hide his/her stunt double, too). Stylistically, older kung fu movies often had a certain bias for Southern kung fu styles like hung gar and choy li fut, which were characterized by deep stances, animal techniques, and hand-based attacks. However, once Jet Li blew the audiences away in *Once Upon a Time in China*, studios started scrambling for Mainland-trained wushu stylists like Vincent Zhao Wen-Zhuo, Jacky Wu Jing, Yeung Fan, Willie Chi, and others. Wuxia Pian filmmakers, on the other hand, started casting handsome and bankable actors, since most of the action in those films was wire-assisted and heavy on the Qi blasts, which required little formal training, if any. Swordplay dramas often ended up having little actual swordplay at all!

The stories also changed during this period. Back in the 1970s, we had kung fu and wuxia movies about Japanese pirates, Japanese ninja, Japanese occupiers, opium dealers, rival schools, rival clans, escort companies, the burying of the Shaolin Temple, the aftermath of the burning of the Shaolin temple, Ming patriots (who opposed the Manchurians/Qings), Sung patriots (who opposed the Mongols or the Yuen Dynasty), bandits, extortion gangs, rapists, tournaments, missing kung fu manuals, vengeance, and the list goes on. Kung fu movies during the 1990s tended to focus primarily on the fictitious exploits of Chinese folk heroes like Wong Fei-Hung, Fong Sai-Yuk, and Hung Hey-Kwun. Wuxia films tended to be adaptations of Louis Cha's wuxia novels or remakes of Shaw Brothers classics...often both at the same time. Today's

film, *13 Cold Blooded Eagles*, falls in the latter category, as it's a rather loose remake of the 1978 classic *Avenging Eagle*.

The film opens with a gang of bandits raiding some random village, killing the men, raping the womenfolk, and setting all of the thatched huts on fire. After retreating to the forest to rest and boast about their exploits, the bandits are confronted by team of a vigilantes/assassins known as the "13 Cold-Blooded Eagles." The Eagles declare their aims to rid the world of all evils before hacking the desperados to pieces with the kung fu equivalent of a meat cleaver. Returning to base, the Eagles are received with open arms by their foster father and teacher, whom we'll just call Foster Father and is played by Yen Shi-Kwan (who showed up in nearly every wire-fu movie made in the 1990s after playing the lead villain in *Once Upon a Time in China*). Foster Father informs the Eagles that their next mission will be wrest the Kung Fu Instruction Manual for the Mythical "Star-Bleed Skill" from the hands of an old master named the Shinshu Monster (who'll be played by the director, Tsui Fat).

After a brief interlude in which we learn that the second highest Eagle, Red Eagle (Waise Lee of *A Better Tomorrow* and *Wing Chun*) is in love with Purple Eagle, we get to the next action scene. The Eagles try to ambush the Shinshu Monster while he's practicing the Star-Bleed Skill, which apparently involves stabbing oneself in the chest with daggers, but the Monster is no easy target. One of the Eagles, Yinmin (Lau Ji-Wai, who played a guy named Batman in *The Legend of the Liquid Sword*), delivers the killing blow, but not before being injured and getting washed away in a river. Yinmin is rescued and nursed back to health by a mysterious kung fu beauty (Cynthia Khan, who set the Girls n' Guns genre alight with films like *In the Line of Duty III* and *Madame City Hunter*). He eventually makes it back home.

The Eagles are then sent by Foster Father to eliminate the Shinshu Monster's old master, since the Monster himself didn't actually have the manual. Unfortunately, their next target isn't an evil man in any sense of the word. However, Foster Father uses the reasoning that anybody associated with the Star-Bleed Style is guilty by association, so the Eagles take flight once more. Red and Purple Eagle, plus another one of their cohorts, try to lead the initial assault on the old man, who's holed up at the Qinlin mountain. The three are set upon by Master Qinlin, who makes kills Purple Eagle and the other guy, and banishes Red Eagle to a cave. There, Red Eagle finds an old man who has been prisoner in the cave for 20 years and learns the truth: the old man is Red Eagle's dad and Foster Father had raped and killed his mother years before. When the old man tried to get revenge, he fell into conflict with Master Qinlin, who crippled him and left him to die in the cave. Red Eagle swears revenge and after getting an infusion of his father's qi, escapes from the cave and kills both Master Qinlin and the old master, who really didn't deserve to die at all. Unfortunately, Red Eagle is killed after unsuccessfully trying taking it to the limit and assassinating Foster Father.

At this point, we're nearly an hour into the movie, so the narrative focuses on Yinmin again. Foster Father has figured that the old master's daughter, Qiuhua, now has the book, so it's off with her head. Now, Qiuhua just happens to be the same kung fu beauty that saved Yinmin's life, so you know there's going to be a conflict of interest right there. Yinmin eventually turns on his Foster Father and fellow Eagles, joining forces with Qiuhua to avenge her father and all of the wrongs that the Eagles had committed. Of course, Foster Father isn't going to be a pushover in the fighting department, so Qiuhua may just have to use the Star-Bleed Skill herself as the last resort, even if it kills her.

So what do this film and its inspiration, *Avenging Eagle*, have in common? Well, both of them revolve around a team of assassins trained by their "foster father." Both of them have a least one member of the team turning against his colleagues and guardian. In both films, the Foster

Father uses a metal claw as a weapon. That's about it. In *Avenging Eagle*, there was only one rebellious Eagle (Ti Lung) and his partner was the husband of one of their victims, who was played by Alexander Fu Sheng. The original was primarily a revenge/redemption tale, while this film brings more stock wuxia elements into the plot in the form of a super-powerful martial arts style and manual, no doubt inspired by the success of the *Swordsman* series at the time. Each Eagle in the original wielded his own weapon, whereas the killers here all use meat cleavers (actually it's a weapon known as the *dadao*, or "big blade"). The tragic ending is sort of reversed here, too.

The main problem with the film is a narrative that never quite knows who the main protagonist is supposed to be. The first act makes Yinmin out to be the main hero, but he disappears in the second act when Red Eagle takes the stage. Once Red Eagle bites it, Yinmin steps up to the plate, although this time he has to share his screen time with Qiuhua, who ends being even more important to the resolution than Yinmin is. Almost the entire second act revolves around setting up a convoluted way in which Yinmin might have a plausible reason for turning against his so-called family, when the major reason for his change-of-heart has a little less to do with Red Eagle's accusations and more to do with the compassion he feels for Qiuhua, who saved his butt earlier. Then there's Cynthia Khan, who's given first billing for this film, but only shows up in two non-action scenes during the first hour of the movie. The movie needed to give her more to do, since she's the most physically-talented protagonist in the cast (plus looks stunning in period garb).

If you can get past that, then you should enjoy most of the action sequences. Tsui Fat was always an underrated action director and his work here is easily on par with the same stuff that Ching Siu-Tung was doing at the same time. The latter is obviously the former's inspiration, especially whenever we get the quick cuts of people doing random flips, a Chingism from that era. While the actors are all wired-up, there's a lot more physicality in the sword fighting than there was in many wuxia film of the time, especially whenever Cynthia Khan, an actual martial artist, and her flexible belt sword are onscreen. Most of the extreme graphic violence that permeated the 1990s wuxia movies is toned down here, with the best moment being when Waise Lee slices off a man's hand (sword in hand), stabs him to death, and then kicks the severed hand across the room so that the sword its holding skewers another guy. There's also a welcome absence of Random Qi Blasts, which means that the actors depend more on their weapons than on extending their arms and making things go boom. The most memorable fight is arguably when Qiuhua and Yinmin take on Foster Father's contingency plan: 13 young kids (probably no older than 10) who Foster Father has been training in secret to take the place of the current Eagles once they're of no more use to him. Since our heroes don't want kill any children, they fight back by attacking the kids' pressure points and paralyzing them (temporarily, I imagine). None of the fights are classics, but I never felt frustrated by the lack of swordplay in a film about swordsmen, which is more than I can say about Jet Li's overrated *Swordsman II*.

As Hong Kong, much like Hollywood, continues to lose its way with more and more "big" offerings, low-budget guerilla efforts like *13 Cold-Blooded Eagles* start looking better in comparison, narrative flaws notwithstanding. (by Blake Matthews)

Three Swordsmen, The (Hong Kong, 1994: Taylor Wong) - A good cast, interesting premise, and nifty production values can't save *The Three Swordsmen* from being the convoluted, dizzying spectacle that it unfortunately is. While by no means the nadir of the wuxia genre, this nonsensical fight-fest will be disappointing for most HK cinephiles.

Let's check the stats on *The Three Swordsmen*, shall we? The film boasts a stellar cast that includes the likes of Andy Lau, Brigitte Lin and Tsui Kam-Kong. These three highly recognizable actors play the titular swordsmen, each of whom seeks to gain supremacy over the martial world. Add to the mix a plot straight from *The Fugitive*, and the familiar trappings of the flying fantasy kung fu genre, and *The Three Swordsmen* seems like a surefire hit, right? Wrong. Conceptually and visually, the film may resemble wuxia classics like *Swordsmen 2* or *Dragon Inn*, but sadly, this one pales in comparison to those highly acclaimed films.

The plot, from what I can gather, involves the upcoming duel between two of three famous martial artists, Siu Sam-Siu (Andy Lau) and Ming Jian (Brigitte Lin). The third swordsman, Wham Dao (Tsui Kam-Kong), has seemingly retired from fighting and will not be participating in this heralded "brawl to end all." But early in the film, Siu Sam-Siu is framed for murder. In the tradition of Dr. Richard Kimble, Siu flees from his captors in an effort to bring the real killer to justice. Essentially the Inspector Gerard of the film, Wham Dao (whose name means "George Michael Sword" in Chinese) returns from semi-retirement to capture the famous swordsman himself. Along the way, Sam gets mixed up with a couple pretty girls named Butterfly and Red Leaves, who have nothing better to do than devote their lives to him. As one would expect, the three swordsmen are locked on a collision course for the film's final, epic duel which will reveal the true mastermind behind all these murder-mystery shenanigans.

Sounds pretty interesting, doesn't it? And it really could have been because *The Three Swordsmen* has all the elements: three equally intriguing swordsmen, a plot chock full of intrigue and betrayal, and even a touch of romance. But director Taylor Wong doesn't seem to know how to handle any of these positives. The plot is rushed, numerous characters are introduced within the space of only minutes, and their motivations are sketchy at best. A scorecard of sorts is provided each time a new character or location appears, but since I can't read Chinese, it's a moot point. And the action sequences are so poorly edited that some fights just seem to be a collage of whipping cloaks and clanging swords. The visible wires at focal emotional points doesn't help either! Granted, none of these actors are real martial artists, so doubles and visual tricks have to be employed to cover up that fact, but the result is just so dizzying that it leaves the viewer with a splitting headache. And don't get me started on the ending, which is probably one of the most ridiculous, anticlimactic duels in Hong Kong cinema history.

Andy Lau and Tsui Kam-Kong acquit themselves nicely in their respective roles, but HK goddess Brigitte Lin is poorly used. It's no secret that ever since Lin's legendary role as Asia the Invincible in *Swordsmen 2*, she has been typecast. She usually plays a powerful woman, a woman masquerading as a man, or even a man—as is the case in *The Three Swordsmen*. In films like *The Bride With White Hair* and *Dragon Inn*, this kind of typecasting is actually good thing, for her parts in those films were plum roles. But here it seems that conceit has run its course. For one thing, why cast a female as a male in this film? Unless the filmmakers wanted to add another layer of homoerotic subtext between the swordsmen, Lin's casting seems to be more about her reputation than her suitability for the part. Furthermore, her character expresses little emotion; it's almost as if the director told her, "Just stand here, say the lines, and hope the action choreography carries you through the movie." Well, it doesn't.

Despite my biting remarks, I didn't absolutely hate *The Three Swordsmen*. If you're a big fan of any of the lead actors or just aching for a HK swordplay flick you haven't seen before, then by all means take a look at this film. But don't expect it to be on par with its wuxia peers because if you do, the only compelling duel you'll be having is with boredom. (by Calvin McMillin of LoveHKFilm)

Trinity Goes East (Taiwan, 1999: Robert Tai) - Robert Tai's last directorial effort (completed in 1999 but sat on a shelf waiting for the right distribution deal) is an unashamed homage to old school kung fu movies but not without a modern sense of humour. Scripted by George Tan the film is more than a little tongue in cheek and definately not to be taken seriously.

An international thief, Trinity, attempts to steal a religious gem but gets more than bargained for when said gem is swallowed by a piglet belonging to an Interpol officer. The jewel is also on the want list of a powerful criminal (played by John Liu) who hires ninjas to retrieve it. All of this adds up to a fast paced mix of comedy and action.

Unlike Robert Tai's previous film (*Fist of Legends 2: Iron Bodyguards*), 'Trinity' is a complete original film containing all new footage. Production values are suprisingly solid given the film's low budget and tight shooting schedule. Budget limitations do show at times with visible wires in some of the fight scenes, or the close up facial expressions of the pig (obviously a puppet, but still pretty good), but given the fact that this film was funded by enthusiasts and not a film company, its still all quite impressive. Although Robert Tai has always been able to produce quality from little-to-no funding.

The fights are all fast paced, featuring some undercranking but not to excess. The first real action scene of the film sees Robert Tai himself as a Shaolin Abbott taking on a Bruce Lee look-alike (Sky Dragon I presume). Despite his age Robert is still nimble and able to carry off the moves convincingly. The Bruce Lee clone is one of the main stars of the film and a very competent martial artists who shows off some flashy techniques. This opening scene shows that Robert's skills as a fight choreographer have not deteriorated.

The main suprise of the film is Roberto Lopez who is a lot more graceful and light on his feet than his size suggests. His staff fighting scenes are some of the highlights of the film. It was also great to see John Liu back on the screen and while he doesn't demonstrate the kind of flexibility he showed in the seventies, he can certainly still kick.

The style of action is pure old school with the moves shot from a distance allowing the audience to appreciate the performances of the martial artists. There are some edit tricks in there, typical of Robert Tai's style, and also some small use of wirework but the action relies primarily on the ability of the actors. Probably the best fight in the film involves two unknowns in a flashback scene. The moves are sharp and the choreography stylish.

The low budget does manifest itself in some of the more dramatic scenes and the quality of acting is on par with seventies kung fu which isn't helped by the dubbing. However these aspects are minor complaints for a film that is essentially a fight based movie. Special mention should also go to Alessandro Alessandroni's original soundtrack in the style of spaghetti westerns.

While this isn't going to live up to the many seventies classics with which both Robert Tai and John Liu were involved, its still great to have another chance to see these two kung fu legends performing again. Hopefully it won't be the last and maybe one day someone will give Robert Tai a bigger budget to play with. (by John Richards of Wasted Life)

21 Red List (Taiwan, 1994: Chong Yan-Gin) - aka 21 Red Treaty - 4 thieves are commissioned and sent to Shanghai to find and steal the Chinese/Japanese treaty.

Fight #1 --- Chi Che (CJ-L) vs white suited servant - Very short but very nice! There's some good bootwork here with impact and lots of chalk dust flying!

Fight #2 --- Break-in at US CIF building - Tons of good stuff is going on here!!! The standout fight is Chi Wu (ALR) using a pair of truncheons against US and Chinese soldiers. Honestly the whole scene of the thieves vs soldiers is a whirlwind of kicks and machine gun fire with a ton of falls. Some of it is ridiculous, but oh...my...word!!!! It made me want to start flinging myself into the furniture it looked so fun.

Fight #3 --- Bar fight with Japanese patrons - An arm wrestling match turns sour and Chi Che (CJ-L) singlehandedly takes on the Japanese, but only for a little bit as his friends join in. Some good falls here.

Fight #4 --- Chi Wan (LS-M) vs gang of samurai - Not bad. It's short, but there's some decent swordplay and 1 nice triple kick thrown in the mix.

Fight #5 --- Chi Che (CJ-L) vs horde of samurai - Oh, this is good!!!! There are some wire-assisted stunts here, but it's great to see guys flying through the air and smashing through lattice and wooden pillars. Some good kicks here and the swordplay is okay.

Fight #6 --- Chi Wan (LS-M) vs Chi Wu (ALR) - Very brief. Not even a fight really, and it's a lot of wire-work. Meh. This is really more of a dramatic confrontation between two friends, but it could've been a whole lot more.

Fight #7 --- Chi Wan (LS-M) & Chi Yin (KY?) vs samurai squad - Holy cow!!!! This is way too short! Good fight! Insane falls! Killer kicks! Decapitations! Cleavings! DUDE!!!!!!

Fight #8 --- Chi Wan & Chi Yin vs Wu Chin (ZF-Y) & Kiki (NH) - Great fight!!! Chi Wan and Wu Chin have a duel with katanas. It's grueling fun, and there are a lot of wire-assisted stunts. But the Best Fight goes to Chi Yin (KY?) and Kiki (NH). These two women have at it hand-to-hand, and it's absolutely brutal in places. This is what the fight between the two men should have evolved to, but sadly didn't. These girls don't look to be doubled either, and they take some crazy falls.

The plot of this is pretty good, though it drags a little at times. It's a 90's movie with an 80's HK actioner feel. So the acting is a bit campy and you can anticipate how some of the characters will respond to certain situations. But it moves along at a pretty good clip. I didn't get bored, that's for sure.

I wish I could properly ascertain who the girl is playing Chi Yin. I checked the HKMDB and only 2 names on the cast list didn't include photos. Me and OAB kicked it around and think it may be Kei Yim. The name sounds feminine, but what do I know.

This is a Taiwanese film, and it's nuts with stunt work. It's almost like the premise of the film was "What can we make people fall into?" Every foot is given a fresh dusting of chalk for the next kick. The choreography is intricate at times. But it's the impacts that will have you going "Whoa!" This movie has a ton of rewatchable moments!

My thanks to OAB for sending this to me. If you favor the HK actioner flavor, track this down and get it!!!! (by Scott Blasingame)

Twilight of the Forbidden City (Hong Kong, 1992: Poon Man-Kit, Manfred Wong) - Taking place shortly before the tumultuous events leading up to World War II, *The Twilight of the Forbidden City* tells the story of Loy (Max Mok), a eunuch who finds himself an outsider after the royal family is thrown out of power. Loy has made the most of things, even going so far as to having a "marriage" with Fung (Carrie Ng) and her son after her husband (Felix Wong) leaves to join the revolution.

Loy's life takes a turn when he meets up with the Elder Eunuch (Roman Tam), who is so impressed by Loy's singing voice that he "invites" him to stay at the royal palace. Even though he loves Fung, Loy's old ties cannot be severed, and he reluctantly leaves. However, after accidentally meeting up with Fung's husband and hearing about the revolution, Loy's loyalties are put to the test.

Overall, *The Twilight of the Forbidden City* is a decent drama that probably would have been better if Max Mok wasn't the lead. He seemed to get a lot of chances to become a leading man back in the early 1990's, but none of the attempts worked. Mok never seemed to have neither the slick moves, charisma, or just raw acting talent which turns actors into stars.

The other actors do a good job, but there's a feeling that perhaps they were tired of doing these sorts of costume dramas (which were glutting HK theatres at the time) so they don't exactly do anything extraordinary, or even above average. The same could be said for the crew; the cinematography, music, and editing are competently done, but nothing to get excited about.

The filmmakers seem to have realized this early into production, and so they tried injecting some shock factor into the movie, most notably a torture sequence where a woman is force-fed burning coals. It certainly does its' job in making the audience squeamish, but ultimately, it comes off as a cheap move to try and elevate this picture from being the truly average historical drama it is. (by HK Film.Net)

Warrior's Tragedy, A (Hong Kong, 1993: Frankie Chan) - Frankie Chan's epic masterpiece! Just kidding folks. Veteran actor Ti Lung does what he can in this sprawling swordplay epic, but an inconsistent tone, a poor performance in a lead role, and underdeveloped characters prevent *A Warrior's Tragedy* from becoming the genre classic that it could have been. If only the film had been put in the hands of a slightly more competent filmmaker.

Based on a novel by Gu Long, Frankie Chan's *A Warrior's Tragedy* details the parallel stories of two warriors: one trained to love, the other to hate, both to be superior swordsman. On one side of this twisty tale of murder and revenge lies the dark and brooding Fu Hung-Suet (Ti Lung). Dressed from head to toe in basic black, Fu wanders from town to town, dispatching his enemies with his impressive ebony sabre. On the other end of the spectrum is the happy-go-lucky Yip Hoi (Frankie Chan), a cheeky, mustachioed fellow who dresses in white and happens to be a proficient martial artist. As one would expect, the two contrasting swordsmen are locked on a proverbial collision course with destiny as both are invited to the home of the villainous Ma Hong-Kwan, who has a sinister connection to our heroes.

Through flashbacks, we learn that twenty or so years prior to the events of the film, a swordsman named Pak was murdered by several assassins under the command of Ma Hong-Kwan. Apparently Pak was a bit of a ladies man, and to avenge his death, one of his lovers sent her only son to avenge his death. That son's identity? Fu Hung-Suet. Trained with only one purpose—the annihilation of all those involved in Pak's death—Fu becomes a morose killing machine, seemingly devoid of human emotions.

Back in the "present day," Ma Hong-Kwan begins to worry that Pak's offspring might be blazing a trail of vengeance, so the elderly villain invites a group of young swordsmen to dinner in the hopes of exposing his future attacker. That night, one of the swordsmen is killed, and Fu Hung-Suet is framed (poorly, I might add) for the murder. Nice guy that he is, Yip Hoi turns into a kung fu Sherlock Holmes in order to flush out the real murderer. From that point forward (and some time before that, too), the story flies fast and furiously, introducing folks that are somehow connected to the plot. But since the film moves so quickly, there's little regard for character development. One just has to accept things as they happen, as the film builds to a (semi) shocking climax about the swordsman Pak and Fu's mission of vengeance. But don't worry, evil is punished, and everybody lives happily ever after.

A Warrior's Tragedy is a mixed bag, to say the least. On the positive side of things, the film does maintain a fairly compelling visual style. From Fu's stylish battle in a snowstorm to the final duel with a warrior wearing a cloak of invisibility, the film is, at times, fun to watch. There's even a clever bit in which several characters imagine how much damage Fu Hung-Suet will do to an overzealous security guard before the warrior draws his weapon.

Perhaps the best part of the film is Fu Hung-Suet himself. As portrayed by Ti Lung (and a fleet-footed stunt double), Fu comes across as an almost iconic character. His black outfit, icy demeanor, and noticeably gimpy leg make Fu stand out in a way that most generic good guys don't. Imbuing Fu with a sense of despair and longing that the narrative never explicitly establishes, Ti Lung does an excellent job in a role that was probably better suited to a younger actor.

But even having said all that, the film could have been a lot better. As referred to earlier, the film contains too many characters whose agendas aren't adequately developed. Granted, this film was originally released as a single three-hour epic (trimmed down to 110 minutes for this DVD release), so perhaps that accounts for the lack of adequate character development. But even so, the truncated running time cannot adequately explain the jarring tonal shifts present in the film. And believe me, this movie is all over the place: Yip Hoi engages in a "cripple fight," there's some anachronistic Ben-Hur-style Roman chariots and plenty of Michael Bay-sized explosions to keep you awake (Sure, the Chinese invented gunpowder, but this is ridiculous!).

But by far the worst part of *A Warrior's Tragedy* is Frankie Chan. Credited as director, writer producer, and star, Chan clearly created this film as a labor of love. Or perhaps, it was a chance to gratify his own ego. Whatever the reason, Frankie Chan just doesn't work well as a comic foil to Ti Lung. He's supposed to be the polar opposite of the stoic Fu Hung-Suet and inject some levity into otherwise serious proceedings, but his attempts at humor are limited to mugging for the camera and making lowbrow jokes. That's quite all right if the end result is funny, but that's not the case here. In the end, we are supposed to recognize that Yip Hoi is a greater hero than Fu Hung-Suet because the former uses his abilities to help, not to hurt. But really, would you trust a guy with such a sleazy mustache?

That's not to say that humor isn't welcome in a film like this. For example, this sort of tonal flip-flopping works well in a film like *The Duel*, which has Nick Cheung (whose mustachioed

sleaziness made sense for his character) and Zhao Wei ham it up while Andy Lau and Ekin Cheng played it absolutely straight as two heroes battling for martial arts supremacy. But in *A Warrior's Tragedy*, it just doesn't work. When a purported "epic film" ends with an AIDS joke and Ti Lung making a vulgar gesture, you know something's wrong.

Despite all my negative comments, *A Warrior's Tragedy* isn't a terrible film. I think my frustration stems from my belief that the movie could be a lot better. The material for an award-winning film is here, so here's hoping a more qualified Hong Kong director will pick up the movie rights. Based on what he did with Jin Yong's characters in *Ashes of Time*, Wong Kar-Wai would likely craft an existential drama about the futility of revenge, the desire for parental acceptance, and the unceasing pain of lost love. With Christopher Doyle's awesome visuals and WKW alums Andy Lau, Tony Leung and Maggie Cheung in tow, who wouldn't pay to see that? Heck, Johnnie To would turn this story into an expertly-drawn battle between two warriors divided by backgrounds but united by fate. And hey, with Johnnie To, there'd be a good chance Sammi Cheng would score a welcome cameo appearance. But for the time being, we're stuck with Frankie Chan's *A Warrior's Tragedy*, a sometimes entertaining, but for the most part disappointing film. (by Calvin McMillin of LoveHKFilm)

What Price Survival (Hong Kong, 1994: Daniel Lee) - Drowning with fatalism and saturated in romanticism, this film held me enthralled for much of its running time. Stunning rapid-fire images come at the viewer in scenes that you nearly want to breathe in and not let out. There are moments in time that you want to hold on to, an image that you have to retain, an expression that you need to remember. At times I had to turn off the film because I simply needed to slow it down.

With allusions to references as varied as the *One-Armed Swordsman*, to Christ bearing his cross to Golgotha, to Oedipus being blinded and forsaken, the film takes on a layered sense of complexity that is thought provoking and yet not entirely clear. I came away from this film with many questions and no answers. It leaves you a bit frustrated because it is difficult to know how much of this apparent symbolism and subtext is valid and meaningful or simply thrown into the mix for stylistic and theatrical purposes. It left me wondering how much of the film I had truly understood.

This is a sword fighting film in which the action is fast and exciting – pushed along by blink of the eye edits – and yet it is often the quiet moments – the slow dance to a languorous ballad, the ravishing close up, the faces in profile, the look of betrayal or the sudden acknowledgment of impending death that capture your heart.

It takes place in the 1930s/1940s and yet the modern age doesn't really seem to have encroached on their traditional world of honor and revenge - a world in which guns never appear. In an odd choice the director shows many glimpses of the scenes to come during the opening credits – but it is done so quickly that it only rivets your attention rather than giving away too much.

Two swordsmen are in a duel with a great deal at stake. David Chiang (of many of the Shaw classic sword films such as *The New One Armed Swordsman*) is the head of a sword school and he is battling with Norman Chu who had broken away in anger from the school years previously to set up his own school. Chu is clearly the bad guy here and in a sneaky move ("feigned suicide") is able to defeat Chiang. Rather than killing him though, he claims Chiang's newborn son. Chiang's wife slowly walks over to Chu and hands him her son – turns to Chiang and smiles for a brief moment before collapsing into the snow.

Twenty years later the son has grown up to be Wang Ning (Wu Xing-Guo) and he has been brought up to believe that Chiang killed his mother and father. He has been waiting for his moment of revenge for many years. Wang is sort of part of a Jules and Jim relationship with Chu's daughter, Charlie Yeung, and another student Jie. It is clear though that Charlie is in love with Wang when she tells him "good swords must come in pairs".

Finally Chu sets his long term plan in motion and tells Wang that it is time to meet his destiny. At the same time Chu has secretly enlisted the aid of Damian Lau – Chiang's right hand man. Chiang learns that his son is alive and is coming to kill him. In a beautiful scene he goes to the grave of his wife and tells her that their son is now a fine man, but neglects to tell her what is about to transpire – only that he may soon be finally joining her.

The fight between the son and father is an incredibly powerful scene as the father tries to teach the son his philosophy of life between thrusts and the film is quickly going back and forth between the fight and Chu far away watching his courtesans perform. I felt like I was holding my breath for the entire scene.

After the intensity of this scene, this film feels a bit deflated and goes somewhat flat. It isn't until near the end that it really picks up again with the final showdown.

The emotions of this film are right there on the screen – visceral and larger than life. Either you get sucked into this Greek tragedy – or you may find it simply baffling and boring. I clearly was sucked in. Its very theatrical, beautifully filmed, has some wonderful sword fighting action - but is without a doubt overlayed with a layer of pretention - that I kind of enjoyed, but I could easily see it turning many people off. There are a number of logic gaps – why doesn't Chiang tell his son the truth (well perhaps there are reasons but they are never spelled out) and the ending is stunning but also perplexing - but I think it is one of those films worth experiencing one way or the other.

One disappointment with the film is that Charlie Yeung does not get as much screen time as I was expecting and is not involved with the action at all. Apparently, there are two versions with alternate endings. If you wish to know what they are - do a deja vu search for this film and look for a posting from Dale Berry. (by Brian of View from the Brooklyn Bridge)

White Lotus Cult (Hong Kong, 1993: Cheng Siu-Keung) - The evil leader of the White Lotus Cult is slowly dying from poison and uses his growing influence in the royal court to retrieve a remedy that's in the hands of his former brother.

Elaborate production values, seasoned choreography, and a sprawling story raises this under-appreciated, historical epic to the level of popular wire-fu films of the period such as *Once Upon a Time in China* (1991).

At the end of the 19th century, a religious order called the White Lotus Cult is fomenting aggression towards foreigners whose influence has grown in the Southeast region of China. Yet, by courting the sympathies of the reigning Empress Dowager, Chan (Gai Chun Wa), the cult's leader actually hopes to gain power and collect the "White Lotus Classics," a remedy needed to cure a deadly poison that is slowly killing him. He talks his former brother, Chin Chen (Yip Chuen Chan) who is a Han Dynasty loyalist, into assassinating the Ching Dynasty Empress only to thwart the attempt himself and thereby gain favor in the court. Chan's additional plan to take the "Classics" remedy that Chin possesses fails as the wounded, would-

be assassin escapes to Canton. Hounded by soldiers, Chin receives aid from Liang Kun (Do Siu Chun), a young rickshaw driver who helps him reunite with Hung (Lily Li), a former love interest with the ability to cure his wounds. With Chan relentlessly closing in, Liang Kung receives martial arts training from the two elder masters. Finally, he is joined by Hung in attempting to save Chin's daughter (Fennie Yuen), who failed to avenge the death of her father at the hands of Chan.

Perhaps, due to the complex and somewhat intimidating story and a lack of "big" stars, *White Lotus Cult* has gone relatively unnoticed by genre fans. Actually, for fans of wire-fu action, this is easily one of the best pics to come out of Hong Kong during the '90's, which is saying a lot considering how many great films in this sub-genre appeared at this time.

White Lotus Cult begins a loose trilogy, mostly starring the same actors in different roles that continues with *Sam the Iron Bridge* (1993) and ends with *One Arm Hero* (1994). Coming out at the peak of period action releases in Hong Kong, this effort garnered significantly less revenue at the local box office than similar projects with names like Yuen Wo Ping and Jet Li attached. However, this does not diminish my opinion that this film deserves greater appreciation. What it lacks in star power, it makes up for with wire-fu fights directed by Kwok Chun Fung that nearly equal Corey Yuen or Yuen Wo Ping's fabulous work. The entire scene involving the assassination attempt is easily the most stunning and complex that climaxes with an exuberant battle between Chan and Chin on a frozen lake.

Other major bonuses include a high level of subtlety in direction and detail in sets and costumes. It's clear that a lot of work went into the film and it's most evident in the sets that include intricately detailed tea house interiors and delectable location shoots in mainland China amid ornate temples and city streets. The recreation of the late 1800's China is impressive and the costumes rival anything seen in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000). But, just as important is how these details are used and director Cheng Siu-Keung puts his cinematography experience to good use with great camera work that sucks in every detail.

The story is admittedly complex to a fault, with a focus on multiple cast members interacting within a historical context that is never clearly explained. But, for those who have even a passing familiarity with Chinese history and the basic structure of your average Hong Kong period film should have no problems becoming immersed in the story. The acting is solid and the script is well written for a Hong Kong release. It is interesting to note that the story is basically a slicked up version of the endlessly reused old school plot of a kung fu master hounded by his arch enemy who takes on a pupil, is killed or wounded and must rely on his young successor to get revenge. Do Siu Chun, who has not had much of a film career in Hong Kong offers up a credible performance, partially attributed to his stately appearance that vaguely resembles Leung Kar Yan, sans the beard. The real star, of course, is Gai Chun Wa who easily slips into his standard villainous role. He is best known for giving Jet Li grief on numerous occasions in films such as *Kids from Shaolin* (1984) and *Fong Sai Yuk II* (1993).

It is disappointment to witness a finale upon a platform with a damsel in distress that apes similar scenes found in *The Tai Chi Master* (1993) and *Fong Sai Yuk II* (1993). This is where the film starts to really show its limitations in terms of fight choreography. None of the actors appear quite as skilled as say Jet Li or Donnie Yen and the whole scene simply fails to hold up to my expectations. But otherwise, *White Lotus Cult* is lots o' fun, especially for Jet Li and Corey Yuen fans. (by Mark Pollard of Kung Fu Cinema)

Wing Chun (Hong Kong, 1994: Yuen Woo-Ping) - Wing Chun is a particular style of Chinese hand-to-hand combat, traditionally thought to have been developed by (and named for) a woman who used it to get out of an arranged marriage with a cruel man. Yuen Wo Ping's [1994] movie *Wing Chun* takes place after all that, continuing Wing Chun's story past the traditional tale.

Scholar Wong (perennial Hong Kong movie bad guy Waise Lee, doing a comic turn for once) comes to town looking for Yim Wing Chun (Michelle Yeoh), intent on hiring her to protect his home from the local bandits. But once he sees her, he decides it might be easier to marry her. That way he wouldn't have to pay her, just feed her.

His plan hits a snag when the bandits show up where the meeting is taking place. Rather than lose face in front of a prospective wife, Wong challenges the bandits to a fight, even though they will certainly kill him. Luckily for him, Wing Chun comes to his rescue. Unluckily for him, Wing Chun comes to his rescue while staying seated on a stool, manipulating Wong's body with a stick to make him fight the bandits. Thus begins a long string of jokes in which Wing Chun emasculates men by besting them in martial arts combat, often with no apparent effort.

The next day brings the beach festival. Wing Chun and her money-hungry aunt "Abacus" Fong (Yuen King-Tan) attend, where they meet up with Wing Chun's father. It seems that Wing Chun's little sister is about to get married, but the matchmaker runs away when she sees Wing Chun coming. Abacus Fong, meanwhile, has no husband because of her bad breath and sharp tongue. And during the festival a third available woman shows up, the beautiful Charmy (Catherine Hung Yan). Charmy's husband is deathly ill, and she hopes that the festival's holy water will be able to help him. But then the bandits attack and Charmy is kidnapped. The men of the town vow to get her back, but the bandits beat them as if they were the Cincinnati Bengals on a Sunday. Then Wing Chun enters the fray and easily defeats the interloper, rescuing Charmy.

The next day the bandits show up at Abacus' tofu shop looking for Wing Chun. In the kind of challenge that only occurs in martial arts movies and *Ranma* cartoons, our heroine asserts that if the bandits' leader can break a slab of tofu while she is defending it, she will acknowledge his kung fu as superior. Wing Chun wins of course, but only after breaking numerous laws of motion and inertia. Still, it's all good moviemaking, and suspension of disbelief is not nearly so important as the suspension of props and people on wires. The sequence is reminiscent of the calligraphy fight in *Magnificent Butcher*, which was also directed by Yuen Wo Ping. Wing Chun is a bit of a throwback for Yuen, and there are also some gags reprised from *Drunken Master* and *Snake in the Eagle's Shadow*.

Meanwhile, Charmy's husband has died. She doesn't have the money to pay for his funeral, so she tries to sell herself into indentured servitude. Luckily (an adverb you'll hear often in any synopsis of this film), Wing Chun hears of her plight -- as if anyone in the village could not hear of the goings-on in the town square -- and convinces Aunt Abacus to buy Charmy (with the help of Scholar Wong, who has come to town to continue his pursuit of Wing Chun) for the tofu shop. The theory is that having a beautiful woman around will help sales. Only in China... or anywhere else on the planet Earth.

With this many women in the plot, a male character is needed to balance things out a bit. Like many martial arts films, *Wing Chun* is, at heart, a love story. Enter Leung Pok To (Donnie Yen), a ranking official who knew Wing Chun as a child. He has come back to town to renew the acquaintance and perhaps begin a courtship. But because Chinese cinematic laws mandate a

mistaken identity subplot, Leung mistakes Charmy for Wing Chun, and mistakes Wing Chun for Charmy's husband! Presumably this is because Wing Chun dresses in male clothes, but mistaking Michelle Yeoh for a man is like mistaking Marlene Dietrich for a man in Morocco's nightclub scene.

At the same time the bandits decide that Charmy is their property. The gang's second fortress lord, Flying Monkey, challenges Wing Chun to a fight. Wing Chun accepts and the two duel on horseback among a field of burning logs. Things go badly for Flying Monkey, who takes a flaming brand to a certain part of his body... let's just say he won't be spanking himself anymore.

Enraged by this, Flying Monkey's big brother, Flying Chimpanzee (Norman Chu) challenges Wing Chun to a grudge match. Besides the added advantage of being monstrously strong (he wields a spear so massive that it must be carried by four of his subordinates), Chimp has the "cotton belly," a bizarre ability that allows him to suck in his opponents limbs after they hit him! In order to defeat this formidable opponent Wing Chun will have to... rediscover her femininity?

Most of Wing Chun's character rests within Michelle Yeoh's slight smile and perpetually amused countenance. It's difficult to think of another Chinese actress who could have carried off the character of Wing Chun at all, and Yeoh does it with the same confidence that allowed her to get the better of James Bond in one of his own movies without inviting the scorn of the audience. There's no doubt about it: the woman has charm, as she displays in a quiet scene shortly after Wing Chun's true identity is revealed to childhood friend Leung. Yeoh is equally at home in a tender bedroom scene and hanging from wires forty feet in the air during combat -- and the world of Chinese cinema is richer for it. (Now, hanging from wires forty feet above a bedroom scene -- that would be something else altogether.)

Wing Chun does have a complicated plot. A lot of the antics between the various main characters without simian names (we didn't even touch on most of it our plot synopsis) seems to be inspired by Shakespeare's Much Ado About Nothing. But the movie as a whole is made simpler by the easy humor of some scenes and impressive acrobatics of others. Old gags (including the tired mistaken-identity subplot) are made new again with clever twists of coincidence. Martial arts movie aficionados will find that spark of excitement again with some of the beautifully choreographed and photographed action sequences, into which the story has imparted a feeling of urgency that is often missing in chop-socky flicks. A last-minute turn into mystic philosophy (included only, it seems, to allow Cheng Pei Pei to make a cameo as Wing Chun's teacher) is quickly brushed aside by the climactic moments of ultimate ass-kicking. Discovering a movie like *Wing Chun* is like discovering one last present under the Christmas tree an hour after you thought the last gift was unwrapped. (by Scott Hamilton and Chris Holland of Stomp Tokyo)

Zen of Sword (Hong Kong, 1993: Yu Mang-Sang) - *Zen of Sword* has a small cast made up of old pros and talented youngsters, a straightforward script that ponders some of the basic questions posed by classic literature, themes that touch our hearts and effective production planning that put most of the limited special effects budget in the last ten minutes of the movie. It has three extremely attractive actresses, two of whom the cinematographer who shot the close-ups (three are credited for being behind the camera) lingered over quite lovingly, some extremely evil villains and some unbelievably good heroes. There is even an

apotheosis tacked on for those who are unhappy with the idea of every one of the characters being dead before the final credits role.

It starts with a bang--literally. As the Princess and her bodyguard flee, the General fights a rear guard action against evil flying monks who have iron hoops and chains to catch him with and who pepper him with explosives. But while the monks outnumber the General, they aren't eager to close with him and actually fight it out, keeping a safe distance from the point of his spear. He is finally defeated when an explosion smashes him into the side of a mountain, knocking him unconscious. We can tell right then that the General is a hard man indeed—the force of the explosion that planted him in a crater that exactly outlined his body. Even though one might be reminded of a Roadrunner vs. Wiley E. Coyote cartoon sequence it does show how tough Waise Lee's General is.

But no one can stand up to the persuasive powers of the Master of Yin, the evildoer who dispatched the flying monks. When the General awakes he is tied spread-eagled on two poles over a flaming pit. Given a choice between betraying his Princess and gaining untold wealth and power for himself or being roasted alive, his decision isn't difficult to imagine.

This Hobson's Choice contains the theme that runs throughout the movie—that moral people will be tempted to stray from the path that they know is the right and proper and only the most noble will be able to make the difficult choices no matter what the consequences. Some, such as Governor Tak Hung, are eager to sell out their principles; others, most particularly the Princess's bodyguard, stunningly played by Cynthia Khan, aren't even tempted from their duty. The most fundamental and difficult decision is posed to the Prince—which is most important, love or honor?

A conundrum indeed and one that is made all the more harrowing by the way it is posed. His only surviving relative, his aunt, a woman who has raised him and who was cruelly tortured by their enemies, wants the Prince to take vengeance on these enemies. The Prince's people are among the losers in a vicious civil war and his aunt, memorably portrayed in an over the top round of insanity by Kara Hui, insists that he lead them to reclaim their homeland. She makes the most of an extended cameo as did the costuming department. She is dressed in some really outlandish garb including a huge feathered hat that looks like it could fly away by itself. Backlit and silhouetted against a glowing sky, shot from below, she is fiercely demented and delivers lines (according to the pretty good subtitles) such as "We worship the sword with the blood of virgins" with maniacal glee.

The Prince, who seems at least as conflicted as another Prince, this one of Denmark, happens upon a beautiful young woman who lost in the forest. Having been stuck in the same valley for most of his life with little knowledge of the outside world and only his crazy aunt for female company, he falls hard for the Princess. Since she is played by Michelle Reis, she of the huge eyes, perfect lips and cheekbones to die for, his infatuation isn't surprising. The Princess is the most steadfast of the lot, perfectly willing to either die or kill others to protect a jade flute, the symbol of her royalty, and fully expects others to do the same.

Not knowing that the Princess is the sole surviving member of the clan that defeated her family, the Aunt treats her like a common whore, telling the Prince that it is fine if he wants to dally with her for a while but when he is finished it is time to get back to the real work of learning the Nine Stance Sword Position from which he can kill enemies by the carload.

The Prince and Princess, who not only don't hate each other but who fall in love, are one set of paired opposites whose interaction push the story along. Another pair is the General (Waise

Lee) and the Bodyguard (Cynthia Khan). She is completely committed to the safety of the Princess as his he until he is turned by the Master of Yin. To complicate matters further they are married although the Bodyguard, once she realizes that her husband is a traitor, doesn't hesitate to draw her sword against him. A third set is the God of War, a former advisor to the emperor who has gone into seclusion but who returns to the field when the Princess is threatened and Governor Tak Hung, a venal and corrupt official who only wants to line his own pockets and who has already sold his soul in order to do so. Fittingly the God of War dies a hero's death while Tak Hung's demise is as tawdry as his life.

There are some inept or just badly thought out scenes. One is a love scene between Waise Lee and Cynthia Khan—they are lying on the ground, both dressed in full battle armor—breastplates, gauntlets, sword belts, the whole regalia. Even if Cynthia hadn't realized that her dog of a husband was just turning on the charm in order to get her to abandon the Princess it still would have been one of the least arousing love scenes imaginable. Another is during the final battle in which the flying monks make their second appearance. They are defeated this time—and it is a thrilling final battle—but they continue to fight after a scene in which they are literally dismembered, almost as if it were put together out of sequence.

Overall, *Zen of Sword* is a very well-done low budget swordplay movie, well worth seeing if you like that kind of thing (I do) or if you are a fan of any of the three actresses. (by ewaffle of HKMDB)